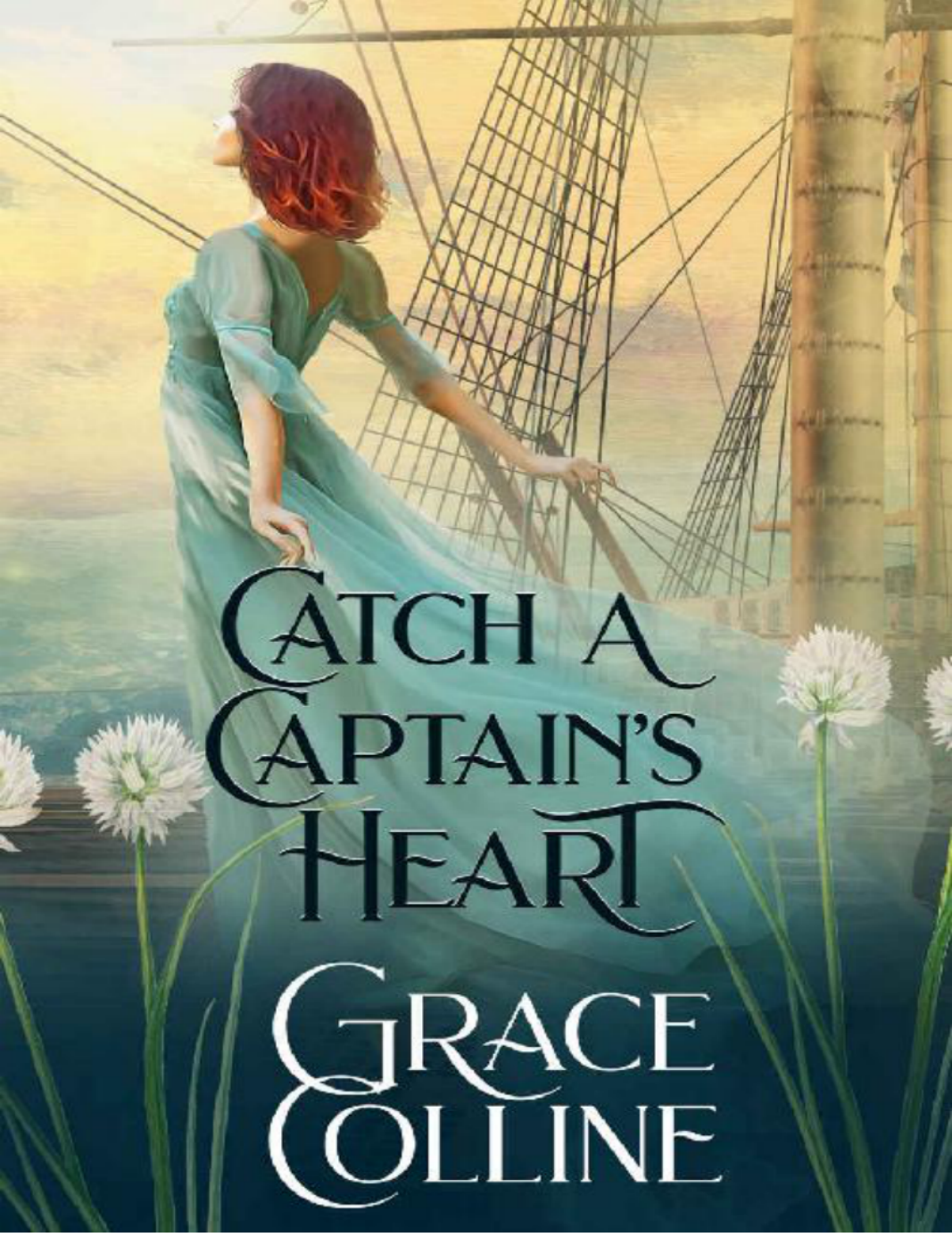

CATCH A
CAPTAIN'S
HEART
GRACE
COLLINE

Catch A Captain's Heart

By Grace Colline

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ISBN:

Cover Design: Dar Albert, Wicked Smart Designs
Edited by Luna Imprints Author Solutions
Proofreader: Debbie Mathis Lucero

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First publication 2021
Bad Kitty Publications
gracecolline.com

Content Warning: Suicide

Catch A Captain's Heart

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Chapter One

Prologue

Captain Desmond Coulter set the letter aside and moved his hand away from it. His eyes closed as his mind ran over those simple words:

My Dear Captain,

I thank you for the honor of your proposal. However, it is not within my power to accept. My heart is already claimed.

Warmest Regards,

Penelope Pratt

Slowly, he folded the letter and set it in the drawer with the others. He sighed and leaned back against the chair, his head dropping back against the hard wooden edge. *And now what?* he wondered. Months spent pursuing the perfect wife all boiling down to those few words.

He would have to start again. But where would he find another Penelope? Lithe, seaworthy, intelligent, and caring. Where to find the woman who would make his life complete?

Chapter One

Eleanor Warburton peered around the corner, watching for some sign of a follower. Her eyes were drawn downward, taking in her apparel and she bit her lip. The trousers felt strange and were tight in the oddest places, but loose in others. Her bust strained against the wrapping she had used to diminish it, and she grieved for the nails she had cut roughly and dirtied. But most of all she could not but shed a tear for her hair, most of which lay in an inglorious pile hidden in the bottom of her wardrobe.

Clipped in a loose approximation of the popular Bedford style, chestnut curls fell about her face and neck. She sniffed and dashed the tear away—now was not the time. She straightened her shoulders and stepped out into the alleyway behind her London home.

She walked quickly to the end of the row and glanced up and down the side street. A few people were hurrying past, heads down in the dreary drizzle. She thanked whatever gods there were for it, people would be unlikely to look very closely at her. She shrugged into her brother's old sailor's jacket. Navy blue and loose on her, she shoved her hands deep into the pockets and headed toward the dockyards in the twilight gloom.

She thought she had walked for miles before the air filled with the scent of seawater and fish as the sounds of the river and docks filled the air. It took some time before she rounded a corner and there they were—masts hovering in the gloom—the ships. Avoiding the big navy ships, she looked instead for a merchant ship. The first she came to was too busy, but the second sat nearly abandoned.

It was a large, three-master. She glanced around, then strode up the gangplank as though she belonged. Once on deck, she looked around but still saw no one. She adjusted the drawstring bag on her shoulder and let it fall to the deck beside her booted feet. Her brother had been a sailor for a while, but had forsaken the work early. He would not miss his clothes, but her mother would certainly miss her…hopefully the family would think she was still with Harriet and on her way to Kent for the coming week. Harriet should have just received her letter that she would not be going. Hopefully, all was arranged for her to disappear…

She sat down on the step that led to the deck where the passenger cabins

were located. She counted only four and wondered if she would be able to hide in one, or if she would have to live with the sailors. *What would that look like?* She wondered. She crept down and opened one of the cabins.

"Who's there?" a rough voice cut into her thought.

She turned, eyes wide until she forced herself to calm and try to appear normal. "It's simply me, Edmund Wadham. I'm looking for employment."

The man stumped closer, and she noted he had a wooden leg. She dragged her gaze away from where the truncated limb met wood and looked at the old seaman's face. An ugly scar ran from his forehead to his neck all along the left side of his face and she tried not to stare.

"Employment? A' do what? Bit on 'light side to work a ship like *Tempest*."

"Who are you, then? I've some experience aboard ship. My father captained a four-master in the war." That much was true at least. She had even lived on board a ship for a month when they had all sailed together to Portugal last summer. She at least knew she was a good sailor, unlikely to get seasick. She stopped herself just in time from biting her lip. That would not do for a potential sailor.

The old salt looked her up and down before shrugging. "First mate'll have to say. E'll be back in an hour or so. Wait abovedecks 'til then."

She nodded and ran up the stairs into the fresh air. Looking around, she sat with her back against the rise of the poop deck. Sighing, she leaned back and yawned, suddenly sleepy. After a few minutes, she edged into a crevice behind a barrel and laid her head down on her elbow. Uncomfortable as she was, she fell asleep.

Light intruded on her dreams, and she struggled to open her eyes. A man squatted there, his face illuminated in lantern light.

"What have we here?" The old salt seemed surprised.

"Um…" She glanced around…had she just slept all night on the deck? The man hovering over her stood, inviting her to do the same. All around her bodies moved in the morning gloom, setting rigging, loading sacks and boxes and kegs into the hold.

She looked at the man standing over her. He backed away as a brown-haired, brown-eyed man strode up and she saw him take in her form and frown. She stood up and went to him. This seemed to be the first mate if not the captain himself.

"Edmund Wadham, sir, looking for work."

She knew she looked the part, aside from her fair complexion. But then the sprinkling of freckles over her nose was enough to keep anyone out of the sun. She swallowed, though, thinking of what living on a ship would do for her face. Still, nothing to be done. She hadn't enough money to pay for lodging, and so must work her way across to either the continent or Ireland, or even just far away from London and beyond her family's reach.

The first mate frowned at her, lifting one of her arms up as he did so. She

snatched her arm back and he laughed.

"Easy, boy. Just checking to see what use you'll be. I can see this is your first time on a ship."

"No, I've been aboard before." She remembered almost too late to pitch her voice lower. "I'm a good sailor, never get sick or anything."

"Quite the posh little accent you've got. Running away from an overbearing family?"

Eleanor felt her face drain of blood at how close he got to the truth. Then he was laughing at his own jest before pointing toward the opening in the deck. "Cook needs some help – his last boy ran off. Run down and find an empty berth to stow your things, then report to the cook in the galley. We sail at daybreak."

She nodded and spun quickly to head for the stairs that led down below. Men milled about now, ignoring her for the most part as she searched among the deck to find an empty space to claim for her bed. A moment of panic seized her to think of sleeping alone amongst all these men. She hardened her resolve and set her pack down on a narrow berth. One man shoved past her saying,

"Outta tha way!"

She wrapped her arms about her and squashed up against the wall. Most of the men were muscled and brawny, yet spare. She had no muscles to speak of…*how would she actually do this?*

A shout from behind startled her and she jumped, spinning as she did so and coming face to face with a raven-haired man who towered over her. His eyebrows practically met in his forehead as he stared at her.

"What are you doing standing about – we are preparing to cast off!" A pair of distant shouts and the ship rolled slightly beneath her feet. He turned on his heel and looked back toward the stairs, shouting as he did so.

Eleanor stared at his back before the shifting floor made her sway, nearly tipping to one side as the ship moved again. She tripped and nearly fell into the arms of the captain who had paused suddenly and spun in place.

His firm hands gripped her and stood her up as he continued to shout directions toward the upper deck. He looked back down at her and said in a loud voice, "Get wherever you are going! Now!"

"I am supposed to help the cook…"

The world whirled as she was twisted about and given a slight shove. "That way." Then he was gone, disappeared up the stairs though she could still hear him shouting above. She rubbed the spot on her arm where he had caught her and made her way back toward a wall that separated the main area from the galley. There, she found the stump-legged cook stowing a large bag of potatoes and straining as he did so. She jumped to and grabbed the coarse burlap which scraped roughly at her hands and fingers as she pulled and pushed it into place.

"Thank 'ee." He said, then straightened and looked at her. He frowned

and said, “It’s you agin? Wot’s yer name?”

“Errr…Edmund. Edmund Wadham.”

“Well then, Eddie. Finish bringing them potatoes down from main deck.”

“There’s more?”

“More? Aye! And lo’s besides. Whaddya think I spen’ me last few days doin’? Gettin’ mea’ and taters and peas.”

Rubbing her reddened hands together, she made her way back to the stairs. Her stomach growled, but by the looks of it, breakfast had already been served. The ship shifted slightly, nearly dumping her onto her side. She staggered up the stairs until she was up once more in the misty sunlight as the fog burned and blew away.

Glints of light on the tips of waves arrested her, and she stood, swaying slightly as the ship was pulled through the waves by the barest puff of air. As she watched, dolphins broke the surface, their breath spraying above them before they disappeared again. She stared, oblivious to the bustle around her, captivated by the sight.

A shadow fell upon her, and she turned to find the glowering visage of the first mate standing over her. “Get to work!” he shouted, and she blanched and started. Casting quickly about, she spied the pile of bags and ran over to grasp the end of one and begin pulling it across the deck toward the stairs. Another shadow fell upon her, and she looked up to see the captain staring incredulously at her.

He bent and grasped one end and lifted. Her end was snatched from her hands as he settled it easily over one shoulder and stalked to the stairs. He shot her a glance before he disappeared beneath the deck, and she scrambled after him.

She followed him to the galley where he set the bag down just as she arrived. The cook looked from one to the other and said, “Wo’s this then? Cap’n?”

“Your boy was struggling. I’ll get Haynes to bring the rest down. He’s lallygagging about the heads.”

“Aye, cap’n.”

“I’m sure you have other work for our newest crew member.”

Eleanor swallowed under his scrutiny but noted a hint of puzzlement in his expression. She turned away from him and accepted the paring knife and potato Cook shoved at her, setting to peeling it with gusto. The captain’s boots echoed as he walked away, and she found herself recalling the crisp blue of his eyes staring out from under his dark eyebrows.

“What’s our captain’s name, then?” she asked.

Cook snorted and dumped a peeled potato into the pot. “Desmond Coulter.”

“How long have you sailed with him?”

“Mmm. Goin’ on three year, now. Good cap’n, good ship.” He seemed disinclined to speak further and Eleanor sat on the hard little stool and peeled

potatoes until she thought her fingers would cramp and fall off. But once she was done with that, she was set to peeling and chopping carrots to go in the giant pot as well. The cook, who went by the name of 'Cook' seared chunks of meat before tossing them into the kettle.

Cook had her busy most of the day. They paused for a time around midday to eat bread and cheese before getting back to work. So intent on her duties, Eleanor did not notice that lamplight had replaced the diffused light from the deck above.

Face red from the fire that heated the pot, she waited handing bowls and spoons to men who began turning up to sit at the large oak table and eat. Ridges all around the table helped keep the bowls from sliding off as the ship pitched and yawed. Her arms were nearly limp from exhaustion before the last man was fed. Cook then handed her a tray and said,

"Take this to the cap'n. Mind ye don' spill."

Eleanor's eyes grew wide, but she took the wooden tray, with its fine silver and china pieces. Cook had even delicately folded a napkin and placed it amongst the silverware. She nearly tripped as she walked, so taken with it.

She rose out of the belly of the ship into starlit darkness overhead. She stared about, then saw the lights on aft and headed in that direction. She passed a sailor who frowned at her as she asked, "Please, where is the captain?"

He simply grunted and shoved his chin toward the glowing window beside the door just beyond the mizzenmast. She struggled to balance the tray and knock, and finally used the tip of her boot to tap at the door. A voice inside yelled,

"Come."

Balancing one end of the tray on her hip, she quickly turned the latch and then caught it before it could slip away. With her elbow, she edged open the door and carried the tray over to the table. It was only then that she saw him standing before a map in his shirtsleeves.

The upper seams of the shirt strained across his shoulders, and she forced her mouth closed as she stared. He spun around, frowning at the world, and lifted the lid from his plate.

"What have we tonight?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"Hmmm. Looks like stew and a slice of bread. Should go well with a bottle of ale. Did you bring one?"

"Er…no. But I'll go get one."

"Stay a minute," he said, looking her up and down. "Where are you from?"

"London. Father was a captain."

"What was his name?"

"What?"

"His name. I know most of the captains…perhaps I know him."

"Oh…um…Edward Wadham. Of the *Nightingale*." Her nose twitched as she told the lie, and she held her breath.

The captain released a puff of smoke from his pipe and set his head to one side. "Strange, I have heard of neither. I hope you are telling the truth."

"Yes, sir."

"Hmmm. Right then, about your business."

She nodded and spun on her heel, but his voice called her just as she reached the door. "How old are you, boy?"

She paused, thinking. How old did she look? "Er…fourteen."

"Bit old to start on a ship."

"Yes, sir." She stood, her fingers twitching lightly toward the door latch and freedom. He watched her for a moment, then waved her on and she spun on her heel, opened the door, and stepped free from the captain's quarters, releasing a large breath as the door closed behind her. She was going to have to get her story straight and keep it. Weaving through the crew she trotted down the stairs to the deck below and to the cook.

Without a word he shoved a bowl of steaming stew at her, and she crouched on the little stool again out of the way to eat. Few heads turned her way and she sat nearly invisible in the general disinterest over the cook's assistant. Soon the men dispersed to their duties or to a well-earned moment of relaxation as she and the cook cleaned up from the supper and made ready for breakfast the following morning. It was late before Cook sent her on her way with an order to be back with the dawn.

Longing for fresh air, she slipped up on deck to creep forward to the bow where she leaned out over the railing to stare upward at the swath of stars overhead. The ocean crashed against the sides of the ship but split away from the bow as it sliced through the water. She breathed deeply of the salty air and tilted her head backward as she took in the moon.

"What? You again!"

She spun to see the towering figure of the captain behind her. Her mouth parted as she said, "Oh! Excuse me."

"Nothing to excuse you for. You're free to wander the decks as you please. Just surprised to see you here that's all."

She nodded and tried to dodge around him, but he shifted and blocked her retreat. "Don't run off – I'm no monster. What were you looking at?"

Swallowing she shot a hand out toward the bowsprit, pointing at the moonlit sea. "It is beautiful." Too late she realized a fourteen-year-old boy would not talk that way and felt her face go hot.

The captain looked surprised, but smiled and nodded as he set off. "Indeed, it is. You'll make a good seaman young Edmund." She watched his broad shoulders as he strode across the deck and caught herself gawking. Roughly she turned around, wondering what to do with herself. Slowly, she turned from the sea and made her way back to the lower deck and her narrow bunk.

Snores and other sounds broke the silence as she settled onto the hard wood. There seemed no way that she would ever sleep that night, and her heart pattered nervously at the thought of so many men slumbering around her. But time whizzed by in a collage of dreams…

A rough hand wakened her next morning and she jumped and clutched her thin blanket to her chest.

"Settle down, boy, jus' don' want you late." Cook stumped off and Eleanor stood and straightened the clothes she had slept in, trying not to look at the men around her rising and dressing.

She rose out of the bowels of the ship to the cries of seagulls overhead. Determined to see the ocean before she disappeared back belowdecks, she climbed onto the poop deck behind the helm. Looking up, she watched as a boy about the age she was supposed to be climbed up into the shrouds to loosen a rope that had gotten twisted.

A sharp sound caught her attention and she turned just as the spanker boom switched sides. Everyone ducked automatically except her and the beam struck her in the chest, knocking her down the stairs and onto her back.

Her breath rushed from her chest as the boom struck her, and she heard the captain shout as she fell backward down the stairs. Darkness closed around her as her head hit the deck. Her eyes opened to a ring of men standing over her as the captain pushed to the front. He immediately began pulling at her shirt when his hands came in contact with the binding about her chest. Too late, she clamped her arms down across her bosom and looked with horror at the captain's face. By his expression, she could tell he knew.

Without speaking a word, he scooped her up and lifted her from the deck. The crew parted before him as he carried her to his quarters and through the door that was quickly opened for them. He laid her on a low couch, and she tried to bound upward away from him, but her breath had only seeped into her chest by then and she was quickly winded. Still, she flailed against the arms that held her and his grip tightened.

"Stay still. When you can talk, you will tell me your name and what you are about." His low voice whispered harshly.

Gasping in air, she said, "I had no choice…"

"Nonsense. You always have a choice. Who are you and what are you running from?"

She looked away. He had stepped back slightly from the narrow couch but still seemed to loom over her. She shoved at him with one hand and said, "I don't expect you to understand."

He did not move. "Try me."

Her breath had now returned, and she jumped to her feet and ran to the opposite side of the room, near the tall windows. She pressed against the glass as though willing it to disappear and let her fly free. Slowly, her fingers curled into loose fists, and she dropped her head. "I am Eleanor Warburton. I am trying to get free of my parents."

"Warburton! Your father is Admiral Frances C. Warburton!"

She merely nodded as he stared at her in wonder. "You ran from the admiral?"

"If you know him so well you would understand why," she snapped.

"I don't know him that well. Know of him more like. Why would you run from such a home?"

"I did not want to do the Season, and my parents were insisting that I do so and find a husband. Preferably one who was rich and blue-blooded."

He sat back on his heels, looking at her. "Well, first thing we need to do is get you out of those clothes."

Her startled expression brought a frown to her face. "I only meant, you need to be in more fitting attire."

"Well, I don't see how that is to be accomplished – unless you have a dress in that chest over there."

"As it happens, I do."

Her eyebrows crept upward in disbelief as he went to it, fumbled with the clasp which seemed to stick. It opened with a crack, and he rifled neatly through the contents until he pulled out a pale green dress in a fine cotton, with a lacy petticoat besides.

"They were for my sister – a treat from India. But, I think you had best wear them now. I have no shoes for you, though. I will go out and explain to the crew. I'm afraid Cook will need to find another boy to help him."

"I don't mind…"

His eyes flashed a brittle blue. "No daughter of an admiral will toil on my ship. Stay here and rest. I will have your things brought to you while I stay in one of the passenger cabins."

"No! I will be most comfortable there, I could not take your rooms."

Again, his shoulders set in steely resolve. "'Tis but for two or three more days until we reach port. I will need access to my charts and desk during the day, but you will be free to loiter about the deck. Now, dress and join us when you are ready."

Eleanor watched him go and sank into the chair. This really could not have gone much worse. What had she thought would happen after all? She dropped her head into her hand and sighed. Such a mess…

Chapter Two

Desmond stopped himself from slamming the door to his cabin behind him. *A girl!* He had known there was something odd about the new boy, but this?! He stopped in the middle of the deck with his hands on his hips. He could see the men eyeing him with strange looks. He wiped a hand over his face.

"Men, there is no other way to say it, so I will say it plain. Edmund Wadham is actually Eleanor Warburton, the daughter of Admiral Warburton. I expect you to treat her with the respect due to a young lady."

He caught the startled looks cast from one to the other, followed by whispers that began to spread as he turned and made his way to the fo'c'sle. He stood, staring out over the bow and watching the waves as the ship cut through them. A pair of dolphins rode the bow wave, and his heart lifted a little at sight of them. He buried his forehead in one hand for a moment.

What was he going to do with the daughter of an Admiral?

A sort of silence fell behind him, punctuated only by the cries of the gulls overhead. He turned, and there stood Eleanor. The pale green dress gave her skin a rosy glow, while her hair bobbed and twisted in the breeze about her face. He stared into those green eyes and felt his heart skip a beat.

She was lovely!

In a flash, all that he had thought he had felt for Penelope was swept away, and he stood as one struck dumb. Eleanor ducked her head self-consciously and glanced about at the silent men. "Excuse me, gentlemen, if I have interrupted your duties."

The men looked away and suddenly burst into activity and she made her way up the stairs to the upper deck of the fo'c'sle. He noticed that even when the ship fell hard all of a sudden through a wave, she simply grasped the handrail and adjusted her step without faltering. He smiled to himself. *A true daughter of a seaman…*

He sobered quickly, realizing that the admiral's family would by now be searching all of Britain for their daughter and he had no way to get word to them. The soonest he would be in port was two days hence, and then the message would have to be ferried back across the Channel.

"I am sorry for the disruption, captain. She leaned on the rail and looked

out over the waves. “My father is going to kill me.”

“I don’t think he will go to that extreme,” Desmond smiled.

“You really do not know my father, then. He is a harsh taskmaster and expects complete obedience.”

Desmond considered and took a step toward her. “Surely what he is expecting of you is not too taxing…”

“Marriage to the highest bidder?” she laughed harshly. “No, I don’t expect you to understand.”

“I just meant that after all…you are a young lady.”

“And it is a lady’s duty to marry and marry well. I have heard that often from my father.”

Desmond could sense the bitterness in her, and said simply, “I am sorry. It does not seem fair.”

She frowned and cast a glance in his direction before turning back to the sea. He took another cautious step toward her, half afraid she would take fright and flee. “I’m sure he has your welfare in mind.”

“Then you know nothing of my situation. I am his only daughter, and I must bring him glory one way or another. Unfortunately, the only way for me is through marriage.”

He edged a little closer and saw that she flinched away from him. He paused, saying, “What does your mother think of all this?”

“I don’t know. She is silent before my father and dares not voice a contrasting opinion.”

He was still as he considered her. “What will you do?”

“I don’t know. You will contact my father and if I don’t return home there will be a hunt for me. I have little money, and nowhere to go.” She sighed and dropped her head turning from the sea. “I suppose I shall just go home.”

The ensuing silence was broken only by the calls of the birds overhead and the waves as they washed against the wood of the ship. Desmond called back an order and then looked at Eleanor. “We will come into Lisbon the day after tomorrow. I will arrange for you to return to England on the first ship handy. We may find a naval ship which would be even better.”

“Why would that be?” She turned back to the sea, leaning against the railing as though ready to fly at any moment.

“The crew would be more civilized, I think. More in awe of your status.”

Her fingernails gripped the wood and her eyes closed—deep green eyes. “Yes, my status. I am well aware of my status.” Her voice dripped with bitterness, and he cocked his head gently.

“Surely not so terrible a thing. There are many who would gladly trade places with you.”

“Who?”

“Any one of a thousand poor wretches. Think what your life could be.”

Her head dropped. “I know I sound ungrateful. But you must understand

how restricted my life has been. Every aspect of it predetermined and supervised and then assessed as to how it will affect my marriageability."

He nodded, considering. "That is something we men are somewhat free of. Our worth is assessed at birth. I am the second son of a gentleman—my older brother inherited everything. Luckily, a great uncle took note of me and left me a small fortune. As I had been at sea most of my life, I used the money to purchase *Tempest*." He stopped, wondering why he had said so much. Damn the girl—she was far too easy to talk to.

But she had lifted her face to his, then. Already, the sun was setting low behind them. It lit up her eyes as she stared evenly back at him. Something in him twisted painfully as their gazes met and he held his breath.

"I think you may understand. How awful to be labeled at birth. I am happy you had an uncle to look out for you."

"As am I, every day."

"Captain, we need a heading." Willie Blake, the first mate, stood respectfully behind him. He tore himself from Eleanor and turned to face his second-in-command. He nodded and trotted quickly to his map spread on the table and held down by the large compass. He noted the light and smiled for the cabin boy had already lit some candles. He calculated their position and their heading before stepping free of his room. Blake stood waiting, then shouted the bearing to the helmsman.

Desmond looked around, searching for the chestnut head among the crew. There she was, by the fo'c'sle, illuminated by the lantern. Light glistened on the loose curls framing her face. He moved toward her, pausing for a moment to order a midshipman back to his task. When he next turned toward the prow, she was gone.

"Sir?" asked Blake suddenly at his shoulder.

"What?" he snapped, then was instantly contrite. "I am sorry. What is it?"

"Cook is wondering where the girl is going to eat. With you in the cabin, or with the men?"

He considered. It would not be entirely appropriate to have meals alone with her, and yet she could not be subjected to the ribald talk of the crew. He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "With me, I suppose. Nothing else for it."

"I'll let Cook know."

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to make a third…?"

Blake laughed and shook his head. "I'll leave you to entertain the admiral's daughter."

Desmond nodded and went to the fo'c'sle to scan the horizon. They were within sight of land and now they had only to follow the coast down to Lisbon, the large port city of Portugal. He had a hull full of potatoes and wool bound for the merchants and mills there.

His eyes caught sight of Eleanor standing near the rail. Her arms were

crossed in front of her, and he realized she was chilled in the early evening breeze. Leaving his post, he wound his way back to the cabin, ready to sacrifice another gift. He fished it out of the depths of the trunk and carried it to where she huddled against the solid fo'c'sle.

"Here, I can see you are cold."

Her head snapped toward him, eyes filled with alarm, but they softened when she saw the shawl in his hands. Moving slowly, as though afraid to startle her, he wrapped it about her shoulders then stood back as she clasped the ends and pulled it close about her.

"Thank you. Who was this for?"

"My mother."

Instantly she went to remove it. "Oh, I can't…not your mother."

He reached out and pressed it back upon her. "Please, if my mother heard I let a woman go cold when I could give her this, she would flay me alive."

Those green eyes narrowed, then widened and she pulled it around her once again. "I will have to send her a note at least, thanking her."

"I can see that she gets it."

She nodded and looked away. "I can't stop staring at the sea, it is hypnotic."

His gaze never left her as he answered, "I would have to agree, but after a while it just becomes part of everything, and you feel it in the background and all around."

She very nearly smiled and cast a quick glance back at him. "You make it sound quite poetic."

He laughed shortly, "I'm glad you think so. I never think of myself that way." He paused for a moment, then added, "If you like, supper will be brought to the cabin. You must be my guest."

"Oh no, I can eat by myself in some corner…"

"Another sin my mother would never forgive."

Her mouth parted, coral lips over perfect teeth. Then she sighed and looked away. "I suppose I must, then."

He led her back to the cabin and the handsome, if scarred, table within. She draped her shawl over the back of her chair and allowed him to seat her. Then he took his own and tried not to stare. She seemed to have no idea of how bewitching she looked with her boyish haircut emphasizing the delicate bones of her face while her eyes were bright and taking in everything around her.

An awkward, few minutes passed in silence until the cook's new boy brought the braised meat and potatoes. Nothing but voices from outside and the creaking of the ship's timbers could be heard for several more minutes as they ate. He was happy to see she had a good appetite, unlike his sister who would often starve herself for a slimmer figure. He wondered what her hair had looked like when it was long and…

"What will happen when we reach Lisbon?"

He snapped free of his reverie and swallowed the forgotten bite. “Mmm. We will dock and our cargo will be unloaded. I’ll send an express to your father, but it will probably arrive on the same ship you sail on.”

“Which will that be?”

He pushed a lump of potato about his plate with his fork. “That will depend on who is there. I would take you back myself, but we are due to pick up a load of wine and cloth that we need to deliver to Ireland within the week.”

She looked up then, “Please, cannot I stay with you? I will be no trouble…then when you are free you can take me back to London.”

He almost conceded, but the weight of commitment hovered over him forcing his resolve to stay firm. “I can’t. It would be tantamount to kidnapping, and your family needs to see you are safe.”

She set her fork down and looked away, her expression lost. “Surely it won’t be so bad to see your family?”

Her gaze fixed upon some point over his left shoulder. “You have truly no idea.”

He looked down, so as not to give way before her sudden change of demeanor. “I am so sorry I cannot accommodate you better.”

She gave a shake of her head. “No, you have been gracious. I simply must meet my fate with some semblance of strength. My courage fails me, however. Almost I would rather dash myself overboard than return to London.”

The blood drained from his face. “Miss Warburton…”

She sniffed and immediately took on a semblance of normality. “Do not worry, Captain, I would not put you in such a position.”

“I would rather hear that you valued your own life too much to do such a thing.”

“I do, truly. I simply dread going home.”

The cabin boy came in and took their dishes and Desmond rose. “I will leave you alone. Please make yourself at home here.”

“Captain,” she stood and extended her hand. “Thank you for all your hospitality.”

He took her hand and started to bend over it, but stopped himself and simply said, “It is my pleasure, Miss Warburton.”

Chapter Three

Eleanor watched him go and sank back onto the chair as the door shut behind him. Her head dropped into her hand, and she felt the tears of hopelessness begin to fill her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she straightened and looked out toward the windows now dark with evening. Looking around she took in her surroundings.

The immaculate bed stood to one side, hanging by ropes so that it would swing with the movement of the ship. Over in the corner stood a large desk. She rose and went to the window to stare out into the darkness. She remembered her father frightening her with tales of sea monsters as a child and for a moment the old fear rose up in her, only to be replaced by another.

Her father.

He would be livid, she knew. Once news of her escapade reached him, he would lash out at the nearest thing—and that would be her mother. Poor Lavinia Warburton, driven to silence by years of harshness and exacting demands, she would be powerless against the force of his rage. Eleanor closed her eyes and turned from the cold glass.

There was nothing for it, she must return home and take on all that he would heap upon her. It was only words, she reminded herself. Perhaps, or perhaps his rage would carry him to truly lash her as he had always threatened.

She wandered over to the desk and sat down, fiddling with the pen and remembering she must write an apology and thanks to Captain Coulter's mother and sister. She glanced about, looking for a spare sheet of paper. Not seeing one, she pulled open one of the drawers. Lying on several sheets of quarto cut paper, was a small packet of letters tied with a ribbon…one lay loose and open.

Curiosity warred with propriety and won. She picked up the paper, noting the small and delicate hand and the name, *Penelope Pratt*. It was obviously a refusal, and she felt a moment of sympathy for the captain to have been refused so brusquely. Slowly she put the letter back as it was and closed the drawer. She would ask for paper the following day and look away when Captain Coulter opened the drawer. Lifting her gaze up, she saw a shelf filled with books. They were an eclectic lot, representing an inquisitive mind with

broad interests. She lifted out one volume of poetry and smiled at the author's name before replacing it. She had a similar book in her room at home.

Home. The momentary quiet was gone. She sighed and went to the bed. Taking off the dress she laid it out over a chair and took off the petticoat. For once, she wished she had a corset as she had felt a little naked with only the shift and petticoat between her skin and the dress. Once they landed in Lisbon, she would have to see about finding a second-hand shop. It would not do to arrive home without a corset.

The captain's bed was comfortable and though she felt she would be awake for half the night worrying, the rocking of the ship and the sound of the sea soon sent her to sleep.

Sunlight filtered in the next morning and she shot up, only to realize it was quite late. The clock's hands pointed at fifteen past nine and she swung her legs free of the bed and snatched the petticoat up from the chair.

"Lord, what will they think of me?" she muttered as she fastened the dress. A small glass hung on the wall, and she paused to look herself over. She quickly dug through her bag and pulled out a brush which she used to tame her locks somewhat. She poured out some water onto a cloth and wiped her face and dampened the more flyaway hairs to force them to lie down. When she had finished, she pulled on the boots and made another mental note to find acceptable shoes in Lisbon. Then, she stepped out of the cabin.

The sun stood between the horizon and its zenith by the time she stood on the deck. She raised a hand to shield her eyes and found the captain up on the fo'c'sle peering out into the distance. She made her way toward him through the bustle of moving bodies all about her.

She noted the curious glances her way and did her best to ignore them. Switching her skirt out of the way of her heavy boots she climbed the stairs, trying to quieten her steps and unable to stop the "thunk" of her step. When she had reached the top, she found his gaze upon her.

Blood flooded her face, and she knew her reddened face would clash with her hair. Smiling wryly she hitched a shoulder up and said, "These boots do not encourage a ladylike step."

He laughed then, his blue-black hair falling back as he tilted his head and laughed out loud. She found herself laughing a little with him. He wiped the tears from his eyes and handed her the spyglass. She took it and applied her eye to it only to ask, "What am I looking at?"

"Portugal. We are getting closer. Actually, you are probably looking at Spain…" he shifted the glass in her hands and pointed it further south. She adjusted its focus and said,

"Ah, I see it. What city is that?"

"Viana do Castelo."

She handed the glass back to him. "The language sound so strange, but I like it."

"I speak only enough to get my goods loaded and unloaded at port. But,

like you, I enjoy the sound of it. Wait until we reach port in Lisbon—you will hear the whole world speaking Portuguese!"

"I look forward to it. I have seen so little beyond London and Kent."

"I love seeing new places. Last year I sailed down to Rabat in Morocco. I am hoping to do more shipping from there. The bazaar is so different from the markets in England, and yet in some ways they are similar."

The salty air washed around her, cool from the water and carrying small droplets. She could feel her face and arms growing lightly damp and felt exhilarated by it. Captain Coulter smiled down at her, his blue eyes alight as they met hers. She found herself smiling up at him and suddenly her heart faltered in her chest.

They looked away, almost as one as the air crackled between them. Her fingers clutched at the damp wood as she struggled for something to say. His voice, deep and manly, broke the silence,

"I hope you are comfortable in my quarters."

"Indeed, yes! Thank you again for accommodating me." She felt her words were stilted, yet did not know what else to say. The air lay heavy between them for a moment when his attention was hailed from behind them, and he turned away.

She stared out at the sea, watching the jib sails buffet in the wind and hearing the soft creak of the ropes and yardarms overhead. Her stomach growled and she realized she had missed breakfast. Pushing from the rail, she went in search of Cook to see if there was a bit of bread leftover that she could snack on.

Cook was standing over a large pan, sweating in the heat of the galley. She waited for him to catch sight of her before he grunted and said, "Missed yer breakfast."

"Yes, is there a bit of bread or something?"

He jogged his chin in the direction of a covered plate. "Gone cold."

She lifted the lid to find two eggs and slice of toast with a dollop of jam on it. She recognized it as coming from the captain's stores and smiled gratefully at the older man. Sitting on the little stool, she ate quickly, realizing just how hungry she actually was. When done, she washed off the plate and dried it, leaving it in the stack, ready for the next meal. Feeling better, she traipsed up the stairs to the quarterdeck and wandered about, watching the men at work. Several boys swabbed the deck or ran through the toiling men at different errands. One man called out from the shrouds, and she heard Captain Coulter respond in his deep, cultured voice.

She felt unaccountably happy as she pottered about. Waves splashed against the sides of the ship, but *Tempest* sailed true on her southeasterly course. A pair of sailors pulled on a line, working seamlessly together as they strained to lift a sail above them. Another was busy tying something off just behind them. Orders barked from behind her sent another set of men toward the aft of the ship. Above, the gulls screed and swooped.

A fishing boat went by and the men aboard it raised their hands in salute. Eleanor smiled and raised hers back, eliciting jovial calls as a result in a language she did not understand. The day passed pleasantly, and she retrieved a book from the captain's shelf. Sitting in the shelter of the fo'c'sle, she passed the afternoon quietly reading.

She looked up as a shadow passed over her and there stood Captain Coulter. He was smiling down at her with his head to one side.

"You look very peaceful!"

"I feel quite peaceful. You have a good crew."

"Thank you, I happen to agree. I have worked hard to assemble such a crew."

"It shows. My father would agree." As the words left her lips, a cold hand touched her spine and she shivered. Gone was the happiness of the afternoon, replaced by the stern visage of her father.

She saw Captain Coulter note the change and he bowed as he turned to stride across the deck toward the mizzenmast where he paused to talk to Blake, his first mate. Closing the book, she sighed and rose. The ship bustled with activity as she wove her way back to the captain's quarters. After replacing the book on its shelf, she went to the windows and stood staring out at the water and trails of foam following the ship.

What was she going to do? Go back to London and face her father. Her resolve failed her at the thought. What prisoner, released from his cell, would turn and walk back willingly? She dropped her head, "I am being fanciful," she said aloud to no one.

With a sigh, she picked up the shawl and turned from the view and walked from the room. The door closed securely behind her, and she leaned back against it. The ship rose up and rocked back down as it coursed its way through the waves. She moved to the rail and looked over, leaning on a barrel that was secured there. As she watched the water streaming by, the sun set in the distance and twilight rose up behind her.

Footsteps sounded against the heavy wood of the deck. She spun to find Captain Coulter standing beside her. He offered his arm saying, "Cook has had supper laid out for us. Please join me."

After a slight hesitation, she took his arm and allowed him to escort her to the cabin where a boy had just finished setting the dishes on the table. Captain Coulter settled her in her chair and then sat down opposite her.

She smelled the fish stew before the dish was uncovered. It looked so incongruous in the fine porcelain dish, and she commented upon that. "My father would never tolerate fish stew in his cabin."

"I insist on eating what my crew eats for the most part. It makes things simpler for Cook and lets me know what my men are subsisting upon."

She nodded. "I suppose that makes sense. I have just not encountered that view before."

"Have you had much opportunity to hear many views on things?"

She sighed and picked a bone out of a chunk of fish. “More than it would seem, I think. Father entertains frequently, and I have often had to sit silently while others discuss topics. I used to enjoy listening…until Father began to show me off to his associates. He would have me play and sing and hint at my suitability as a wife. He is not subtle, and it is embarrassing for all parties concerned.”

“You have a brother, do you not?”

“Yes, Charles.” Her throat tightened as she considered him. When she looked up, Captain Coulter’s eyes were on her. She cleared her throat a little and said, “My brother is a little wild, and frustrates my father no end.”

“I admit I had heard something like that.”

She pushed a carrot round with her spoon, then set the spoon down. Catching sight of a broken fingernail she pulled her hand back and hid it under the table. “My father is simply going to kill me.”

“I’m sure that isn’t true.”

She said nothing. She could easily imagine the scene when she arrived home in second hand, poorly-fitted clothes with her hair cut and hands a mess. Her mother would faint, and her father would storm. Captain Coulter’s warm voice intruded on her thoughts,

“It could be they will be so happy you are safe that they will forgive you.”

She sighed, unable to believe it. Looking up she noted his forehead creased in concern. “Don’t worry, Captain,” she said. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t blame you.”

He snorted. “I’m not worried for me – your father cannot touch me. But I wish I could make you smile.”

She smiled a little. “There, that will have to suffice.”

His eyes crinkled in response. “That will do for now.” He stood then, picking up the plates and moving toward the door. “I will send the boy up to get the rest. Goodnight, Miss Warburton.”

She watched him go and sat for a moment before rising and moving to stand beside the window. She could hear the sea, but could see very little despite the lanterns that swung above the cabin. Now and then a spray of water hit the glass.

A knock sounded, and the cook’s new assistant came in to collect the dishes. She turned to watch. When he had gone, she made ready for bed, then curled onto her side, trying not to think about going home. But they would come into port the next day, and she would have to face it.

Morning came after a restless night. Lisbon rose glittering from the sparkling sea. The ship rushed forward as though anxious to meet the large port. Eleanor stood in the corner of the fo’c’sle, watching everything going on around her. The sails billowed as the captain relayed messages to lower some of them in order to slow their speed down as they came into port. The decks were suddenly bustling with activity as the helmsman brought them closer to

their designated slip.

Eleanor watched as lines were thrown to men on the dock and the ship was moored. Her heart faltered as the gangplank was positioned. She clutched her bag to her and glanced around for Captain Coulter. Then her gaze lifted to the other ships moored along the dock. Which of them, she wondered, would carry her home?

A shadow crossed her, and she looked sharply upward. Captain Coulter stood beside her looking down at her with sympathy etched across his face. “It is time, Miss Warburton.”

They went first to the harbormaster to determine which ships were headed for London. Only one was London-bound, and that was the *H.M.S. Interminable* captained by one Arthur B. Gandsworth. Captain Coulter frowned a bit when he heard that, but tried to smile down at her nonetheless.

“Come, Miss Warburton, I will take you to the *Interminable*.”

“Sir, I must find a shop where I can find some proper clothing. A secondhand shop somewhere.”

He glanced about, then he nodded and led her along a side alley and onto a sunlit street. The smells and sounds of the dock could still be heard, but were quietened by the trees planted along the paved street. She walked at his side amid the bustling of seamen and hawkers standing alongside their barrows of fish and other wares from the ocean.

He looked into each shop they passed until they neared one which had hats, bonnets, and a dress in the window. She went in, leaving him outside as she quickly went through the available goods. A corset, lightly stained but serviceable was available, though she suspected it might be rather snug in the bust. She went into the back and tried it on, and as she suspected it compressed her bosom uncomfortably. Nevertheless, she wore it out under her dress and felt much less exposed with a corset on.

A petticoat, shoes, and three other dresses that were not too badly out of fashion lay before her. One of the dresses had sleeves, though it was summer, and she bit her lip as she considered whether or not to get it. In the end she decided against it, and bought just the two dresses. One was in a dismal shade of burgundy that would clash horribly with her hair, and she grimaced at the thought, but she was days away from England and would need more than one or two dresses.

The shop owner was happy to see the English coins and wrapped everything up. She had paid over most of her money when she saw a bonnet. It was simple straw with a linen lining and cream ribbons. She held it up to the light and counted out her remaining shillings. The owner shook her head and she sadly set the bonnet back down. A hand lifted it back up, and she turned to see Captain Coulter there, holding the bonnet. He smiled and stepped up to the counter where he paid quickly for it and handed it back to her.

With a shy smile, she fitted it over her short, waving locks and tied it

under her chin. She glanced in the mirror and smiled—no one would suspect her hair was short. Satisfied, they left the shop with Captain Coulter carrying her packages. He led her back down the street toward the dock once more, where they made their way to a military ship several slips down from the *Tempest*.

Granted permission to come aboard, they navigated the gangplank and stepped down onto the gleaming deck. A uniformed captain caught sight of them and approached quickly. Youngish, in his late thirties, with a high forehead and rather small eyes, he came through his bustling crew with eyes only for Eleanor. She turned her head slightly so the brim of her bonnet hid her face and let Captain Coulter speak for her.

"Captain Gandsworth, I presume?"

"Indeed! And you are?"

"Desmond Coulter, captain of the *Tempest*. I am hoping you would be able to escort Miss Warburton back to London when you sail. She is most desirous of returning home as quickly as possible."

The small eyes narrowed as he looked at her and he said, "Are you kin to Admiral Warburton?"

"He is my father."

This seemed to catch him off guard and his eyes glanced about rapidly for a moment as though expecting the admiral to appear suddenly. "How can I help you?"

"Have you a cabin I can use? I simply need to return to London."

"Certainly, I will have one of the officers' cabins readied for you. May I ask what you are doing so far from home?"

She glanced up at Captain Coulter, then away. How to explain to this upright sailor what she had done?"

Captain Coulter smiled slightly and said, "She found herself caught up in a childish game and ended marooned on my ship completely alone. I am sure the admiral is beside himself with worry over her and will be most relieved to see her safely returned."

Surprise and shock registered on the other's face, but he turned to her and called a boy over. "Here, take Miss Warburton's things and place them in the empty cabin. Take her along and show her the way."

She turned then to Captain Coulter, sorrow and nervousness radiating from her. "Thank you, captain, for everything."

He took her hand and bent over it, his lips brushing the back and causing a tingle that stirred her heart. "I am glad to have been of service."

She nodded, tearing her gaze away as she turned to follow the boy aft to where the officer's cabins lay. They wove through the various seamen working and then under the captain's quarters to where the officers lived. He led her to a single small cabin at the end and opened the door for her, setting the packages down on the lower bunk within.

"It's Lieutenant Boyce's old cabin. 'E died this Spring of a fever 'e

caught." With this cheerless announcement, he shot off, leaving her alone in the cramped space. A single piece of polished metal was nailed to the wall, and she caught her reflection within. The strain of the past few days was evident in the slight shadows under her eyes. And yet, she thought, the sea air had done wonders for her complexion, despite the tiny freckles that had appeared over her nose.

She sighed, unwrapping the new dresses to hang on a hook so that they could air. Then she turned and took a deep breath before returning to the deck to face the naval captain and his inevitable questions.

Chapter Four

Desmond's throat constricted as he walked down the gangplank and away from the *Interminable*. He did not like leaving Eleanor on the naval ship, and silently questioned himself. Sternly, he replied that she was in good hands and would be well-cared for.

He made his way back toward his own ship, stopping to deal with business that needed attending to. Loads of his cargo streamed from the hold on the backs of workers and he watched for a moment before turning to find the owner recently arrived to claim it. Their business completed, he strode up to the deck of his ship to supervise the rest of the unloading. His first mate was there, and he waved him off.

"Go on, now, Blake. I can handle this."

"You're sure, captain?"

"Aye, go on."

"Thank ye!" Blake trotted off toward his quarters to get ready for a night on the town.

Desmond tarried about the fo'c'sle. The unloading had finished and the last of the crew had left to go spend their pay packet in the bars and backstreets of Lisbon. He hunted for a large, fine file and worked at a rough spot in the railing for a few moments. Then he oiled the spot and put away his tools. Staring out into the greasy water of the port, he felt lonely.

Why now? He wondered. What had changed that sent him down this rabbit hole of lost feelings. He found his gaze lingering on the tallest mast of the *Interminable* and had his answer.

Eleanor!

Instantly he pushed the idea from him. There was no way that the admiral's green-eyed daughter could ever consider him. What had he to offer her that a dozen other suitors could not better? He had no title, no estate, nothing save a cottage on the southern coast of England and a ship. Surely, she would never consider him…

His chest tightened and he looked up, eyes on the distant mast. At any rate, he knew he would try. He had found the girl he had waited for, and he would not let her go so easily. But what to do? His mind went quickly over the schedule for the next few weeks. They had a scant three days in London

within a fortnight. Perhaps he could call on her to make sure she had been returned safely.

As he watched, the main mast of the Interminable began to move. He thought he could see the lines shifting as it was drawn out from dock. His heart sank in his chest. Three whole days in Lisbon, then on to Madeira before heading for Southampton and finally, London. Anything could happen before he got there.

She could be claimed by another.

His fist slammed down onto the railing.

He knew he would not allow that to happen without acting. But what to do? Perhaps his sister could help…

He returned to his cabin and headed for the desk. Quickly he pulled out the drawer and shoved the packet of Penelope's letters aside as he dug for a piece of cut paper. In a neat, though sprawling hand, he penned a quick letter to his sister and sealed it. If he acted quickly it would go on the next ship heading for England…

Chapter Five

Captain Gandsworth stood waiting for her as she emerged from the officer's quarters. He frowned as he looked down at her. "We are putting out, just now. Did you wish to watch?"

"Oh yes, of course." She motioned him on ahead and went to stand by the railing where she could be out of the way of the sailors. Bodies moved and wove about, each focused upon a particular task. Several were pulling lines to turn the yardarms, others were guiding ropes as they released the sails. Captain Gandsworth shouted orders and men scuttled about. There was an element of clockwork to the movements, and she enjoyed their activity.

Once the ship had cleared the docks, the rest of sails fell open with a muffled pop and swelled with the slight wind coming from the east. The ship was a big three-master, a little larger than the *Tempest*. It gleamed with naval precision and felt nearly sterile after the comfortable homeliness of *Tempest*.

She turned from her perusal to find the captain's eye upon her. Biting her lip, she made her way to the fo'c'sle and was about to step on the stair when a midshipman stopped her with a hand out and a glance up at the captain. Gandsworth gave a slight shake of his head and said, "Please join me, Miss Warburton."

Belatedly she remembered that her father had also insisted that no one enter the fo'c'sle without invitation and wondered what other stilted manners awaited her. She reached the hallowed sanctum and joined the captain at his side.

"You seem to be a good sailor. Though, I would expect nothing less of Admiral Warburton's daughter."

"I suppose I am. At least, I am never sick." The ship rolled over a wave just then as though to test her, and she smiled into the faint spray.

"It will take us near four days to reach London. How will you occupy yourself?"

"I will stay out of the way. Perhaps if you have some books, I might avail myself of them."

"I have only such works as a naval man would appreciate. No novels or such."

"I have quite broad interests…"

"After supper, perhaps. See you, that speck on the horizon? A French ship I vow."

"Why do you think so?"

"It is to the north, where France lies. We must be careful – I would hate to enter into battle with a member of the fairer sex aboard."

"I will stay out of the way if it should be so."

"We will know soon enough. Now, I must beg you leave me to the running of my ship."

A little affronted, Eleanor nodded and went to the stairs. It had been, after all, Gandsworth's idea for her to join him on the fo'c'sle. Still, she stepped lightly down the stairs, though her new slippers were wont to pinch. At least, she thought, she was no longer clomping about the deck in the heavy boots she had taken from her brother.

She watched the speck on the horizon grow until it resolved into a large fishing vessel flying Portuguese colors. Behind it, however, a bank of gray advanced toward them causing her to shiver a little. Though she had little experience on the waves, it looked to be a large storm brewing.

Glancing up at the captain, she noted his eyes on the horizon as well. When she turned back, it was to see the bank of clouds even closer. The fishing vessel had turned toward the coast which was still in view along the eastern horizon, but the *Interminable* was headed west into deeper water.

She broke from her reverie as a young midshipman came up, sketched an odd bow, and said, "Miss, if you don' min', cap'n says you best go to quarters."

She cast a final glance at the advancing storm and headed for the officer's quarters and her own little room. Once the door was shut behind her, she sat on the bed, her slippered foot tapping. The single window showed only a gray sky and an angry sea, and she peered out with a beating heart. Her mind went immediately to *Tempest*, and she found herself grateful it was safe in its slip in Lisbon.

She heard a series of thuds as the sails came down and in her mind saw the sailors securing them and the lines against the growing gale. The wind came up none too soon, blowing spray from the tops of the chopping waves. The glass rattled with the wind, and she drew Captain Coulter's shawl around her shoulders, clutching it in front.

Suddenly she stood, her feet quickly catching the halting rhythm of the ship. She squared her shoulders and stared out the window, even as large drops of rain spattered against it. "I will not sit cowering in a storm. I will face this." In her heart, she knew she meant more than the storm. She would face her father, confess what she had done and refuse to apologize.

The sky went dark and suddenly split with a shot of lightning that crashed outside. She wondered where the captain was, and knew he would be on deck if he was worth his commission.

She sat down, though her shoulders were still squared. Outside the wind

howled and the rain lashed, and she sat alone in the darkness as the ship rolled and bucked in the maelstrom. The afternoon waned and still the storm raged. She soon lost track of time and waited while the wind died slightly, and the pounding of the rain became a pattering.

Standing, she opened the door and peered out. Shouts and thumps echoed beyond the foyer of the officers' quarters, and she edged slowly out to see what was happening. As she pushed the door open and climbed the narrow stairs to the poop deck she paused in horror. A man dangled from a mizzen yard, a rope around his neck. Two sailors were in the process of climbing up to dislodge their fellow.

"What happened?" she asked to the men standing by.

"Jonesy slipped trying to untangle the lines from the broken yard. Ropes stopped his fall."

It was only then that she noted the splintered yard half hanging from the mast. Rain still fell in light sheets driven by the dying wind, and she wiped the damp from her face as she turned away from the sight of Jones's purpling face.

"Get back to your cabin! This is no place for a woman."

In the midst of her shock from the harsh words, she caught sight of Captain Gandsworth standing on the poop deck, supervising the removal of the body. His gloved finger was pointed straight at her and her eyes flew wide open.

"Get below! Now!"

Anger flamed within her, but she turned and went through the door, shutting it hard behind her to give emphasis to her actions. Pacing within the foyer, she ignored the growing pain in her heel from her shoes and stamped a little louder than necessary with each step. Eventually a thud sounded on the deck outside and she went still. For a moment only the wind could be heard playing through the lines, then the sounds of normal activity rose again.

Going to her cabin, she sat on the bed and looked out the window. Rain still spattered against it from time to time, joined by spray from the waves, but she could see the sky had darkened now due to night falling and her stomach growled urgently.

Time passed slowly and the light faded into darkness. A cabin boy came and set a candle in the wall sconce to give her light. An hour later he returned, saying,

"Captain says if you please, ma'am, to join him for dinner."

Still angry at his treatment of her, she nearly said no, but her stomach insisted she rethink that course of action. She had not eaten since early in the day that had now turned to night. She nodded to the boy and shut the door behind him, quickly changing into the maroon dress and tidying her hair. She stepped out to see some of the officers on their way to the captain's quarters.

The sea still chopped about, but the sailors seemed to take it in stride. Eleanor had to reach for the handrail once or twice going up the stairs, but

was once again grateful she did not suffer from seasickness. She noticed one of the lieutenants eyeing her curiously and hazarded a guarded smile in his direction.

He grinned, saying, "If I had known we would have such delightful company I would have joined up sooner."

She chuckled. "I am only here by accident. And, I don't know how delightful I am."

"Well, you talk and smile, so I'd say that is rather wonderful. You're certainly a dashed sight better to look at than the rest of the crew!"

She was still laughing when they entered the captain's quarters where the table lay already for them. Captain Gandsworth frowned in her direction, and she wondered what she might have done now.

As they sat, he introduced them all around, and Eleanor learned that the complimentary lieutenant was Byron Simcoe. He was the newest officer to join the *Interminable*, and tended to listen more than he spoke throughout supper, something Eleanor approved.

No mention was made of the unfortunate death during the storm. Aside from the curious glances shot her way, very little notice was taken of her during supper. Captain Gandsworth's narrow gaze sought her frequently, but she deigned to meet it. Instead, she focused her attention on the rather tough mutton facing her and the Yorkshire pudding with congealing gravy. Hungry as she was, it was nearly more than she could handle.

Dabbing her mouth with her napkin, she sat back to wait for the rest of the company to finish. Captain Gandsworth's eye fell upon her and he said, "Miss Warburton. Perhaps you would tell us how you came to be on board the *Tempest* without a proper chaperone."

Eleanor's mouth fell open, and she swallowed at the bold request. "I would prefer not to discuss my private affairs in company."

"I see you fancy the latest fashion in hairstyles."

"I think it looks absolutely smashing on her. I shall tell my sister and she may just copy it," said Lt. Simcoe with a wink in her direction.

"I would suggest against it. The fashion is not well established and is seen primarily in older women. A maiden should keep her hair."

"Well, this maiden saw fit to cut it."

"A decision I am sure you regret."

She did, but she would never admit it. Instead, she lifted her chin and said, "I try not to regret, captain, as actions are not reversible. I do, however, learn whenever possible."

"And what have you learned in this instance."

"That my decisions regarding my appearance are not for general comment."

At this, Captain Gandsworth's bland face reddened though she heard a covered snort from Lt. Simcoe and another officer. Eleanor tired suddenly of the conversation and stood to take her leave.

"Thank you, captain, for a delightful dinner. Gentlemen…" She swept the company with her gaze and walked away, closing the door rather firmly behind her. Muffled laughter broke out behind her, and she felt suddenly mortified. Cheeks red, she hurried to her quarters and sat on the bed, clutching the shawl to her as though a lifeline. What she wouldn't give to have Captain Coulter there to stand in her defense. He, at least, had been gentlemanly and accepting, courtly even…

Her head came up a little. Courtly? Was that truly how he had been? If so, how did she feel about that? A warmth welled up within her, replacing the coldness that had grown over dinner. Courtly…as though courting her. Could it be? Could a man such as Captain Coulter truly find her worthy of pursuit?

A tiny terror tremored then, that perhaps she was wrong, and he felt nothing of the kind. Oh, please, she cried silently, let it be so. Let him truly want me! In an instant, she saw herself on the *Tempest*, writing letters and reading in the sunshine while the dolphins leapt in the bow wave. Captain Coulter's arms around her…

She stopped. What did this mean? Was she in love with the captain? Another terror gripped her, this time concerning what her father would say. She had no doubt that he would not let his only daughter go to a merchant marine. She stood and went to the window, peering out into the blackness at the unseen waves. What was she going to do?

She sighed. The truth was there was nothing to do except go home. Captain Gandsworth would see to that. She had no doubt he would insist upon accompanying her to her home and presenting her to the admiral himself.

Slowly, she lowered herself to the narrow bed and sat on the edge. Reaching behind her, she unfastened the gown and lifted it off. The petticoat and corset followed, leaving her in the simple chemise. Crawling beneath the rather fine woolen blanket, she stared into the dark, thinking about Captain Coulter and a life on board the *Tempest*.

Chapter Six

Four days later, London arose out of the fog. Eleanor stared through the mist as one who faced certain death. Captain Gandsworth had decided that her good opinion was worth earning and had shown her a better side to his manners since that first dinner. For her part, she did not care one way or another. Let him shower her with attentions, his character was already established in her mind.

She adjusted the shawl slightly and dropped her head. London grew larger, the sails billowed out pulling them on and there was nothing she could do to stop the ship in its tracks. They must dock, and she must be delivered home. Her things were already packed, and she wore the simple blue dropfront gown she had found at the secondhand shop. It barely served as a morning dress, and she had chosen to wear it for her homecoming for just that reason. Let her parents see how she had fared the last two weeks from home.

"Miss Warburton, are you quite all right?" Captain Gandsworth's rather fine voice broke into her reverie.

"Yes, captain. Quite."

"We are coming into port. I don't need to tell you it will be rather hectic for some time. I will attend to you once we are tied down."

"Yes, captain." She wondered if he could hear the lifelessness in her voice, or if he would simply take her words at face value. It mattered little. Before the day was over, she would be face-to-face with her father.

A pain in her fingertips recalled her to the present. She glanced down to see her fingernails digging into the polished wood of the railing. She released her grip and smoothed the wood with her hand. She noted that her skin had lost the pale, nearly translucent appearance and was now a little tanned. She smiled grimly as she thought what her mother would have to say about that.

Sails were raised and tied off, lines were tossed and tied down. Soon, the gangplank was lowered, and she clutched her bag to her, feeling the chill of impending doom seize her spine and nearly buckle her knees. Then she lifted her chin and faced the captain as he came for her.

"I will escort you to your home. Can I have the address to give the cabbie?"

"Longsdown House, on Wimpole Street. It is not far."

"Thank you. If you will come with me…my lieutenant will finish overseeing the business here."

Swallowing, she ignored the proffered arm and walked ahead, reaching the gangplank before him and refusing his help at stepping upon it. She held the somewhat too long skirt out of the way and waited while the captain called a cab. Then she was settled inside with the captain a little too close for her comfort.

Luckily, he did not speak for the short drive. She could see familiar trees and landmarks growing larger as they neared Longsdown House. She forced herself to breath and look up as the house came into view. The cab stopped, and she had to step down from it onto the very walk before her home.

She saw a curtain move and before they were halfway up the walk, the door opened, and she saw her father standing in the entry way. Fear whirled through her and her legs nearly failed her, but she refused to give in before Captain Gandsworth.

Admiral Warburton's eyes never left his daughter, and she stared straight ahead at a point to the left of his head. As they neared him, he stepped aside to allow them to enter, and it was only then that she allowed her gaze to meet his.

A dark rage lay there.

Captain Gandsworth stepped aside and gestured abruptly toward her, leaving her to face her father alone in the foyer. In the background she heard her mother cry out once in delight to see her, but further response was crushed by a glance from the admiral. Then, he turned his attention to the captain.

"And who are you?" thundered the admiral.

Whatever the captain had expected, it was not this. Stammering before the admiral's rage, he said, "Arthur Gandsworth, captain, *H.M.S. Interminable*."

"Are you the one who kidnapped my daughter?"

"Nay, sir. She was found by Captain Coulter of the *Tempest* to be aboard ship. He brought her to Lisbon and handed her over to me to return to you."

"Coulter of the *Tempest*. I see." He turned his eagle-like profile toward her, his white eyebrows tufting upward where they met in the middle of his lined brow. "He skulked off rather than face me I see."

Eleanor rose to Captain Coulter's defense. "Nonsense. He had further business in Madeira and Southampton. He could not stop everything because I snuck aboard his ship."

"Snuck? Is that how it was?"

She paled, unable to tear her gaze from her father. "I…may have dressed like a boy and gotten taken on by the first mate to work for the cook."

Her mother uttered a cry that was quickly smothered.

"What in God's name are you wearing?"

"A dress from a secondhand shop in Lisbon."

He reddened. "And now half the navy have seen you parading about in a

scullery maid's cast-off. Get to your room and do not come out until you are presentable. Lavinia!" he shouted toward her mother. "See to your daughter."

Lavinia Warburton shot to her feet and trotted to Eleanor's side. Behind her she could hear her father thanking the captain and ushering him out the door. She smiled grimly at the captain's probably disappointment. She sobered as she realized that she had not faced the worst of her father's anger yet.

Lavinia had grasped her arm and was clinging to her tightly. "Mama, I am fine."

But her mother sobbed a little, breathily, and tightened her grip. Eleanor covered her hands with her own and led the way to her room. When she had reached it, she settled her mother a chair in front of the dressing table and turned to look around.

Lying on the bed was the chestnut hair she had cut from her head prior to running away.

Her throat caught and she looked away, eyes misting over. There was nothing for it, her hair was gone, and she would have to face the world as she was. She glanced down to find her mother's tearstained face lifted to hers.

"Oh, Eleanor. You are safe!"

"Yes, Mama. I am."

"And home. Oh my – we must get you out of that gown." She sniffled and stood to help her unbutton the dropfront and slip out of the dress. She let her mother untie and loosen the corset and quite happily stepped free of it. Soon enough, she was wearing her own, clean corset, chemise, petticoats, and shoes, and her favorite pink linen afternoon dress. She sat down in the chair and looked at her hair in the reflection.

Her mother's hands appeared on either side of her head, and she ran her fingers slowly through the waving locks. After a moment, she went to the wardrobe and pulled free a scarf which she wound through the loose tresses in a close semblance of a turban. Eleanor turned her head from side to side to look it over, and then smiled a little at her mother.

"Come, now. Father will be waiting."

Eleanor sighed and rose to walk beside her mother. Together, they went downstairs. A maid passed them and shot a frightened look at Eleanor's hair before scuttling past. The two women reached the bottom of the fine staircase and headed toward the left-hand hallway and the open door halfway down.

They entered into a large room with bookcases on one wall and various artifacts dotting the space around them. Any child would have been delighted to explore the masks, lanterns, lacquerwork, and other oddments, but Eleanor cringed from them lest she accidentally touch one and cause it harm.

"Close the door." The admiral's voice fell heavily in the large space and seemed to darken it. Lavinia dutifully closed the door and came back to stand beside her daughter.

"Sit down, Lavinia." She shot a frightened glance at Eleanor who

nodded, once, and then she shuffled over to an armchair and sat on the edge of it.

The admiral looked at Eleanor who stared at a spot just above his head. A taut silence followed as he seemed to consider her. He dropped a hand onto his desk and the noise caused Lavinia to jump. Eleanor simply stood.

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Only that I have no intention of attending the Season."

"You will, and you will allow some qualified young man to court you nicely. Then, when the time is right, you will marry."

"No…"

"Yes. Or I will divorce your mother and introduce my mistress."

Eleanor's shocked gaze fell to her mother, who simply stared at the floor. She already knew. Eleanor looked at her father and took a step forward, her hands balled at her sides. "How dare you speak so in front of her!"

"I speak however I want in front of your mother or anyone else. I have been faithful to my Katherine for these ten years at least. She is pressuring me to formalize the arrangement and I am of half a mind to do so. Still, I think I will let you determine my course of action. Marry, and marry well, or your mother will be disgraced and cut off with nothing.

"Charles…"

"Your brother cares for nothing except wine and women and gambling. He is close to being cut off as well. What is your decision?"

She stared into the eagle eyes of her father, hatred ringing through her. Almost she defied him, but the cowering form of her mother stopped her. Her gaze dropped and she lifted one hand in surrender.

"I will do my best."

"Excellent. Katherine will be disappointed, but I will remind her that the Season is not over yet. Best do what you can to win a man before the year is out."

She swallowed against the hard lump in her throat. "May I go now?"

He simply waved on hand and then indicated her mother's slumped form, "Take that with you."

Gently, she bent to lift her mother from the armchair and led her from her father's room. Lavinia followed mutely, her shoulders slumped forward and her footsteps shuffling. Eleanor led her to her mother's room and sat her on the chaise.

"Mama, I will not let that happen to you."

Her mother shook her head. "It will come to that eventually, my dear. There is really nothing you can do. I suppose," her voice cracked, and a tear spilled down her faded cheek. "I suppose I can go live with my brother."

"You will stay here in your own house. Father be damned!"

Lavinia looked up, and her weary, pale eyes sought out Eleanor's. "Please, my dear, I will not let him dictate your life."

Eleanor knelt before her mother, clutching her hands in her own. "Mama,

I promise, I will look after you. We will beat him at his own game, just wait and see."

Trying to smile, Lavinia nodded. "Go on, my dear. Leave me be for a while. I have much to think about."

Rising slowly, she bent suddenly and kissed her mother's cheek before turning to leave. When the door was shut behind her, she leaned against it, her heart beating madly in her chest. For all her brave words, she was frightened at what her father would do.

Catching the curious glance of a passing maid she stopped her saying, "Please, fetch my mother some tea." The maid nodded and scuttled off. Eleanor stepped lightly down the hall to her own room and went inside.

The truth was, her father was powerful. He had climbed high up in the Navy and made many friends in very high places. None of them would blink twice if he divorced her mother and introduced his mistress soon after, though his footing in society would, of course, falter somewhat. Worse, if he did not divorce her and simply left her to live in disgrace while another woman took her place. Eleanor's fists clenched in helpless anger. What could she do?

A knock sounded and she spun in place to see the same maid from before enter with a tea tray. "No, I meant for it to go to my mother."

"Yes, miss. I've taken hers. I thought perhaps you could use some."

Eleanor looked at the maid. She was a short, pert little thing with bright red hair and brown eyes. "Thank you. What is your name? I think you are new."

"Yes, miss. I only came last week. My name is Abigail, but my family calls me Abby."

"Well, Abby. Thank you for the tea."

"You're welcome, miss." She bobbed a little curtsey and left after setting the tray down on the little table next to the bed. Eleanor sat down and poured herself a cup, then nibbled on one of the sweet biscuits Abby had included. The tea was hot and strong, just as she liked it, and went a long way to calm her shattered nerves. By the time she had finished the pot, her breathing and her heartbeat had slowed.

She sat on the edge of her bed, wrapping her arms around her and wishing suddenly she was back on the *Tempest*. What, she wondered, was Captain Coulter doing? Where were they headed next? Did he have a sweetheart in some port…?

Her throat tightened at the thought, causing her brow to wrinkle. Why did she care? And she did care – enough to cause her very soul to cringe at the thought of another woman in his arms. Tears brimmed again and she shook herself to get rid of the discomfort, but it did no good. Another grief had seized her, and she was forced to face it.

She was in love with Captain Coulter!

And yet, her father would never approve. A mere captain – a merchant marine? Her eyes closed at the thought. Though she would gladly trade her

life for one at sea beside him, it was not a future that would keep her mother from dishonor.

What could she do?

Her head dropped onto her chest as she stared at her twined fingers. She had no choice. She must do the Season and marry with her father's approval. Her fingers clenched, and her mouth dropped open in a silent cry as her fingernails bit into her flesh.

Slowly she straightened her fingers and looked up. The finely patterned wallpaper was spattered with blue flowers, the same blue that hung in draperies about the pair of windows. Her dressing table stood between them, holding her brush set and the fine bottles of perfume her father always given her. The trappings of her prison…

Rising, she went to the window to look out past the tree that shaded the small garden and into the neighbor's yard. A nurse with two small children played on the back lawn. They seemed happy and carefree, unlike she and her brother had been at their age. Charles and Eleanor…never close as children, certainly not now. For that matter, she wondered where Charles was at the moment...

Chapter Seven

Charles Warburton lay on a tattered couch in a dingy room across London. Bottles and dirty glassed littered the table and the ground around him. His reddened eyes opened, and he pushed himself up from the sagging cushions and sat up, head in his hands. He willed the pounding to go away, and yet it continued right between his eyes as though about to explode forth from his head.

"Gantry…are you here?" he called out. A muffled oath echoed back. Some glass tinkled and Charles winced as the noise reverberated in his brain. Standing up, he stepped over a pile of vomit and stumbled across the room to the single window. Pushing aside the curtain he blinked at the bright light that filtered into the room. With a growl, he threw the ragged curtain open and turned to look at the dingy room in which he now lived. Not a single servant to clean up, and men like Archie Gantry sunk so low as to still try and cadge off him.

If only his father would pay what he owed him as the only son! He was the heir, and look at how he lived. Barely scraping by – all because he would not live the upright, naval life demanded by his father, the admiral. Well damn him—he wasn't about to spend his life on a ship as his father had done. Damned uncomfortable and dangerous—how could he want his own son to live that life? Charles certainly didn't. That is, if he had a son, which he didn't.

That he knew of…

He shook his head and went to sit in a chair at the small table. He pulled a bottle toward him that still had some golden liquid and drank it in a single draught. From the corner shadows emerged Archie who stumbled over an upturned chair to totter to the couch. He nearly trod in the vomit, but pulled his foot back just in time.

"Damned vile place you have here, Warburton."

"No need to stay, Gantry."

"Ah well, nowhere else to go."

"Well, I don't know how much longer I'll be able to pay for this. Money's damnably tight just now."

"Your father…?"

“He won’t part with a farthing unless I go back to the Navy.”
“Damn fool. What a life…”
“If he continues on, he may well cut me out which would be disastrous.”
“Too bad he doesn’t die…then you inherit, and all is well.”
Charles was silent at this. His mind whirred suddenly along a new track.
If his father died…

Chapter Eight

Lady Rebecca Maberly took a bite of her morning eggs and frowned down at the familiar handwriting on the letter in her hand. It was her brother, Desmond's, writing and she worried it held bad news as her brother was not in the habit of writing. The sun was finally poking through the morning gloom and filtered through the net curtains behind her.

Dearest Reb,

I hope this finds you and yours well. I am in Lisbon, at the moment, and in need of some help. I don't know if this is something you would feel comfortable in doing, but if so, then know that I will be eternally in your debt.

I had an interesting experience these past few days. A young woman disguised herself and came aboard the ship as a cook's assistant. I did not discover her until we were out at sea, and so she was forced to endure the trip across the channel.

Her name is Eleanor Warburton, and she is the daughter of an admiral. I don't know if you are in their set, but if so, could you keep an eye on Miss Warburton? I would like to know how she is doing, and if all is well with her. Is there any way you could manage to find out?

I know this must seem somewhat interfering on my part, and yet I find myself concerned on her behalf. I shall be in London around the 20th. Please say you will help.

Your brother,

Desmond

She set the letter down and smoothed back a brown lock. Her eyebrows had climbed her forehead during the reading of the letter, and she was still in a state of mild shock. It seemed that her brother had found another woman after being rejected by the other girl. That he felt strongly for her was evident in the very nature of the request.

She cast her mind out…Admiral Warburton. They were in the same set, but only just. She thought she had heard some rather unsalacious things about the admiral, but remembered nothing of the daughter. Suddenly, she was intrigued and rose to go to her writing desk, her eggs and toast forgotten.

Passing the ballroom, she glanced about, estimating how quickly she could manage to organize a ball. She bit her lip, for it would take at least three

weeks to prepare, and she was filled with curiosity about Miss Warburton. She wondered, could she invite her to tea?

Pulling a piece of paper toward her after reaching her writing desk, she wrote a note and quickly wrote the direction. She handed it to the butler and went to the piano where she played a modern song rather badly.

She looked up as she finished to see her husband leaning against the entrance to the parlor, watching her.

"You really never learned to play well, did you?"

Her chin lifted, and she smiled. "You did not marry me for my musical abilities."

He laughed, "No indeed!" He pushed off and came toward her as she rose to meet him. He gathered her to him and kissed her soundly. "Mmmm. Kidneys and eggs for breakfast I see."

"Yes, though I didn't get to finish. I got a strange letter from Desmond and had to act upon it." Quickly, she told him the gist of the letter and added, "I simply must meet this girl!"

"So, you have written her and…"

"My dear we must have a ball. Just a middling one, so that Desmond and this girl can be together!"

He winced. "When is this ball to take place?"

"I was thinking in three weeks. He'll be in London then, and it should be enough time to organize everything."

"My dear, the expense…"

"Oh Sholto! It is the Season! Just think, we should have done so before now!"

She looked at him, tilting her head in the endearing way that never failed to touch him. He sighed and one side of his mouth crooked upward. "All right, my dearest. Plan away."

She grinned and reached on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "I am going to invite this girl to a tea…just the two of us to get to know her."

"Have you been introduced?"

"My dear! She was just on Desmond's ship. What more do I need?"

He smiled and shook his head, and she shot him a daring glance as she skipped off to find the housekeeper to begin planning her ball.

Chapter Nine

Desmond stared out over the bow of the ship. The sea lay calm around them, parting in a line of white-capped streams that flowed out alongside. He called out a heading and heard it repeated back to the helmsman. The ship's course changed slightly, bending closer to shore and to London.

He had not heard from his sister, but he had no doubt that indefatigable woman had planned something. They were now a couple days later than he had originally planned to be in London, and he hoped he had not missed out on anything.

They sailed with an empty hull, something he had never allowed to happen before. But he found himself wanting some freedom onshore this time, and had not picked up any cargo in Portsmouth. He would find something, he hoped, to carry from London. For now, he simply felt pushed to see Eleanor.

He went through the next series of actions almost by rote. The ship was docked, and Blake left in charge as he ran to catch a cab to his sister's home.

The streets flew by, then jogged slowly on for a time. He found his heartrate increasing as he neared Little Point, the home of Viscount Maberly, his sister's husband. As the ironwork fence came into view he edged forward on his seat.

He was up the walk and on the front step when the door opened. "I saw the cab pull up—I've been watching for you for two days now! You're late—what happened?"

She ushered him into the parlor and sent a maid scuttling for tea as she passed. Desmond allowed himself to be pulled along and settled on the settee beside her she reached for both his hands and sighed. He laughed a little and said,

"We were delayed in Portsmouth. The owner of the cargo didn't arrange to transport it for a few days and so we were stuck. But, I am here. Tell me, have you contacted Miss Warburton?"

She smiled knowingly, "I have. She is coming to tea tomorrow, and to a ball I am having in six days' time."

He grinned. "I thought my letter would get you busy."

"Well, you know…I have no children to keep me occupied." Her face

twisted for a moment and she looked away.

Desmond reached out to her with one hand. “Give it time, Reb, it will happen.”

“It’s been three years, Des, since I lost the first one. Nothing since then.”

“But…”

“No.” Her hand jabbed downward to cut off the response. “Please, Des, understand. I have to stop hoping. I have to, for mine and Sholto’s sake.”

He wanted to plead with her not to give up, but he understood needing closure. If not for Eleanor, he might still be pining after Penelope. But then, what he felt for Eleanor far surpassed any emotion he had carried for the other.

Rebecca leaned back and smiled, pushing away the heaviness that had grown between them. “Now, I am sure you would like to wash off the smell of the sea and rest for a bit. We are having a few friends to dinner tonight, but Sholto dislikes evening dress so don’t worry about that.”

“I have clothes, Reb.”

“Yes, Des, I know. I’m simply telling you not to worry about it. Sholto is much less stringent about these things than mama or papa were.”

He bent forward and kissed his sister’s cheek. “Very well, sister. Lead me to my room.”

“I can’t believe you aren’t staying on your ship.”

“Well, I might after tomorrow. But, this makes it easier to be here for Eleanor and tea.”

“I might have known. You’d never stay for me.”

He grinned down at her as they stood. She took his arm and led him out of the parlor and to the handsome staircase rising upward and lit by a modest, but perfectly proportioned chandelier. The went to the left when the staircase branched and then down the short hall to one of the rooms.

Filled with relics of Elizabethan times, the room featured a small portrait of Elizabeth I and furniture from the latter part of that era. His eyebrows shot upward, and he shot a glance at his sister.

“The Queen’s Room?”

“Sholto insisted.”

“Well, well, I am suitably honored.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Des. His parents were here last time.”

“The Green Room would have done just as well this time.”

She gave him a push and shut the door behind him. His trunk had already arrived and been unpacked. He had brought very little, planning to spend most of his time onboard *Tempest*. Still, he could see that all was prepared for him to spend a pleasant couple of days with his sister and her husband.

And Eleanor…

Impatience reared its head and forced him to pace for several moments before gaining control of his emotions. He went to the window and looked out over the road passing in front of Little Point. He wondered if she knew he was

expected as well, and how she felt about it.

Turning from the window, he trotted downstairs and searched among the rooms until he found his sister deep in conversation with the housekeeper.

"We need to clear enough room for perhaps ten to fifteen couples." Rebecca stood assaying the room from her vantage.

"If we move the furniture to the edges of the room, it should suffice," the housekeeper offered.

"We will need a card room…"

"I think the parlor will work. We need simply erect a couple tables in there."

Rebecca sighed and her eye caught Desmond's. "Alright, Mrs. Scuddy. We can discuss this more later." Mrs. Scuddy inclined her head and moved off. Rebecca lifted golden brown eyes to her brother. "Well, Des, are you well settled?"

"Yes, perhaps just a little anxious about tomorrow."

She sighed and looked up at Desmond. She laid a hand on his arm, and he said, "Have you heard from mother lately? She would love to see you…"

"It is difficult to get to Surrey, Reb. I will try closer to the holidays." He looked down at his sister, noted she was rather pale and asked, "Are you quite well, Rebecca?"

She smiled ruefully. "I am just a bit tired today. I am well. Just nerves over this ball. Sholto thinks I live for this thing, but it is hard on my nerves."

"And all my fault. I'm sorry, Reb."

"Nonsense. I am happy to do it. It's about time you took an interest in a girl."

"I was interested in a girl…"

"I take it that was nothing compared to this."

"What makes you say so?"

"You never asked me to intervene for her."

"I fear there will be much against me in this case."

She frowned and cocked her head to one side. "What do you mean?"

"Come now, Reb, what admiral will want a mere captain to marry his daughter. I am not even in the Navy…"

"Des, any man who knew you…"

"Now, Reb, think clearly. This is a gentleman's daughter…"

"And you are a gentleman's son."

"Second son."

"Who inherited our uncle's wealth and invested it into a profitable business."

"But a business, nonetheless."

"You are determined he will be against you."

"I am a realist. But I appreciate your support."

Her face softened and she nodded. "I look forward to meeting this girl."

"I look forward to seeing her again." He frowned and glanced around.

“Where is Sholto?”

She sighed. “He had to go down to Kent to discuss some problems with the estate there. He should be back tomorrow evening.”

“Don’t you usually go with him?”

“Yes, but this time I had plans and so he went on alone. It is only for a few nights, so I said I would be all right.”

“Well, you do have the entire household to help you.”

She batted her hand against his arm. “Hush, you are supposed to wonder how I manage all by myself.”

He laughed and smiled down at her, a little concerned at the slight circles under her eyes. A sense of disquiet filled him suddenly, and he wondered if perhaps he should have kept his sister out of his affairs. And yet, she seemed happy to be involved. He pushed the thought from his mind and followed her to the parlor.

She motioned to the piano and asked, “Shall I play for you?”

He hurriedly shook his head saying, “No, no, I won’t trouble you.”

“I’m not that bad, actually. I have been practicing.”

He swallowed. “Well, then, let’s hear how you’ve improved.”

She sat down with alacrity and began. Desmond cringed when the first note went awry, and did not stop until she had completed the piece. She looked up in triumph to see him recovering and her face fell slightly.

“It wasn’t that bad…”

“No. Not as bad as it could have been, I suppose. Tell me, you do read the music, don’t you?”

“Ugh! Of course I do. You’re as bad as Sholto.”

“I am glad to hear he has some sense, anyway.”

“Beast!” She closed the instrument and stood. Suddenly she brightened, saying, “Oh my! Sholto has returned already!”

Desmond rose in time to greet the young Lord Maberly after he was kissed by his wife. “Really, Rebecca, in front of company!” he admonished lightly, but still maintained a hold on her. “Captain Coulter, so glad to see you in my home!”

“Lord Maberly, the pleasure is all mine.”

Rebecca’s husband smiled at them both. He had an interesting face, and blond, boyish locks that seemed determined to defy him. And yet he was perfectly mannered and a tad precise. Rebecca gazed up at him with adoration.

“My dear, we were not expecting you! I shall have to alert cook!” She left immediately to do so, and Lord Maberly motioned to one of the chairs and lowered himself onto the settee.

“Coulter, I am so glad you are able to visit us. Your sister has been in high spirits.”

“I am happy to be here, though I was concerned that Rebecca is a little overtired.”

Lord Maberly's mouth thinned slightly, and he said, "Yes, I have noticed it as well. She still grieves the lack of children and I have tried to encourage her to set it aside, and she says she has but..."

"You think that is it, then? Grief?"

"And an attempt to push herself so hard that she does not think about it."

"I see. My poor sister."

"Indeed. I would do anything within my power to give her a child, but…"

"Yes. These things are not always ours to give."

He looked up to see his sister returning with a smile on her face. "There, crisis averted. Cook says there is plenty for all."

"What are we having?"

"Goose. I hope that meets your approval?"

Maberly smiled. "My dear, whatever you feed me is fine."

She smiled up at him. "Well, now you will be here for my little tea party tomorrow."

He harrumphed and glanced over at Desmond. "Er…perhaps I will have some business in town. You Coulter?"

"I will be happy to attend. I know her guest rather well, you see."

"Hmm. You make me look bad. But truly, dearest, I must see the lawyers."

"Well," her eyes flashed but she smiled anyway. "I will forgive you this once and be satisfied with just Desmond."

"Well thanks ever so!" Desmond feigned a hurt expression.

"You know what I mean." She suddenly went wide-eyed and then her eyes rolled up and she collapsed.

Maberly caught her before she hit the ground and shouted, "I say! Some help here!" Desmond lunged forward to help. Between them they supported her to the settee where Maberly knelt beside her, chafing her hand and whispering urgently to her. Her eyes flickered open, and she drew a deep breath and said,

"What happened? My dear…"

"You fainted." He glanced back to where the staff stood silent and raised his voice. "Call the doctor – it is urgent."

"It is not. I simply fainted." She immediately tried to rise, and he restrained her.

"Just lie still for a moment. You do not look truly well."

"Yes, sister," said Desmond. "Lie still. You gave us quite the fright."

"Oh Des, you know me. Hale as a horse."

"A horse that just went down as though at the knackers. Lie still, Reb."

She sighed and rolled her head toward her husband. "Yes, my dears. How long must I stay so?"

"Until the doctor says otherwise."

Meanwhile, the housekeeper, Scuddy, brought a tray of tea herself and

made an especially sweet tea for her. Maberly helped her to sit up only long enough to take a few sips. It was not long before the doctor came in, somewhat grumpily and listened impatiently to Maberly's explanation. He shooed everyone out of the room. The staff went back to work, and the two men stood in the foyer pacing as low voices emanated from the direction of the parlor.

"Would you rather go to the library?" asked Maberly.

"No, I am content to wait here," said Desmond.

They did not wait long. The doctor came out brushing his hands together and harrumphing at the same time. "Go into your lady. She is well enough." He took his hat and stick from the butler and exited quickly leaving them to rush to Rebecca's side.

"I'll leave you…"

"Nonsense, Des. Come in." She was sitting up, and though pale seemed in full control of herself. She set the teacup down on the tray and looked from one to the other. Slowly a great smile spread across her face, and she said,

"Oh, my dears. It is wonderful and frightening. I am with child again. At least, he believes so."

"And did you not think it?" asked Maberly.

"My love, I had given up. I have overanalyzed the signs for so long only to have nothing to show for it. And now…"

"And now you will take it easy. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, my dear. Only this tea tomorrow and the ball in a week."

"No ball."

Desmond felt his chest constrict at the thought of missing the possibility of dancing with Eleanor, but he nodded his head in support of Maberly. Rebecca fixed them both with a stern eye and said, "The invitations are out, most of the work is already done. And though I will of course take it easy, I will not put it aside. Desmond, I know you truly do not want to see it cancelled."

Desmond looked from one to the other. "I do not want you putting yourself or your child at risk."

"I won't, I promise. But I need you both to let me do what I can."

"Of course, Reb. Just know we are concerned," said Desmond.

"I know. As am I. But things are too far along, and I won't cancel this little ball."

"All right, my dearest."

"Now, I think I heard the gong call us for dinner. Let's all go in or cook will have our heads for letting it go cold."

Desmond smiled and followed them into the dining room.

Chapter Ten

Eleanor stood in front of the mirror perusing her appearance. She wore the pale, green gown that Captain Coulter had given her, and her mouth twisted with a wry smile. She'd had the dressmaker alter it to her own measurements and found she preferred it to most of her other gowns. She added her favorite ivory sash and her little emerald cross necklace. Her hair was curled around her face, and arranged around a patterned scarf twined about her head. It looked well, though she missed her long hair being braided and tied up around her face. She adjusted one of her earrings and glanced down at her hands. Her nails were much improved since her sailing on the *Tempest*, and she did not think gloves would be necessary for a tea.

She went down the stairs and waited for her mother to join her. As she watched the stairs, Lavinia Warburton came down the hall from her room and joined her in the foyer.

"Well, Mama. This should be nice."

"Yes, dear. I will enjoy meeting your new friend."

"Well, she is the sister of a friend…"

"Of course. The captain of that ship…the *Temptation*."

"The *Tempest*."

"Of course…"

"Yes." They waited until the carriage pulled up to the walk before stepping down the stairs leading up to the house. Eleanor was wont to move quickly, and kept having to stop and wait for her mother whose step was slow. Finally, they entered the carriage, and the footman closed the door on them.

The ride to Little Point was short, and neither spoke during the trip. Eleanor fought butterflies and her mother seemed more dispirited than usual. She stared out the window, and Eleanor thought she could be a beautiful woman if only her eyes were not so lackluster and her face frozen into a frown.

"Mama, are you well?"

Lavinia turned slowly to look at her, once bright hazel eyes now faded with worry. "Indeed, my dearest. Why?"

Eleanor shook her head lightly. "You seem withdrawn and sad."

Lavinia turned back to the window. "Possibly, I am. I will be well for

this outing."

Eleanor had to be satisfied. The carriage came to a stop, and they were helped out by the footman. She stared with approbation at the house before her. Designed to appear smaller than it actually was, the front garden was meticulous, yet with a feeling of abandon in the small plots of wildflowers scattered throughout. She smiled and lifted her eyes to the main door in front.

Lady Maberly welcomed them graciously, and Eleanor started in surprise to see Captain Coulter there as well.

"Captain! We meet again!"

"Indeed Miss Warburton! I hope it is not unpleasant."

"Not at all, I am happy to see you." And she was, very happy. Her heart raced suddenly, and she nearly forgot her mother. "Oh, allow me to introduce my mother, Lavinia Warburton." She was happy to see her mother respond appropriately and with some spirit. Rebecca led them into the parlor where they all sat. Somehow Captain Coulter ended up seated next to Eleanor on the settee while Rebecca engaged Lavinia in some discussion about the latter's dress.

Captain Coulter's eyes had not left her, and Eleanor felt suddenly shy. "I am glad you accepted my sister's invitation," he said.

"How could I not, so kind as you have been."

Blue eyes met green and the room around them seemed forgotten. Captain Coulter cleared his throat with a glance at his sister and said, "I am glad to see you returned home safely."

"Yes, it was a strained voyage on the *Interminable*. The captain seemed determined to find fault with me, and there was a terrible storm at one point."

He nodded. "I was worried – it was bad enough being in port when it struck. I feared for you out on the water."

She laughed then. "Yes, so did I. But then, I seemed to gain strength from it. Does that make sense?"

"It does. The same has happened to me from time to time."

Lady Rebecca interposed, "My dear, that dress is exquisite."

"I'm glad you like it – it was meant for you!"

Captain Coulter then looked down and smiled. "You have made it yours!"

"What is this? I sense a story…" Lady Maberly interposed.

Eleanor turned and said, "I'm sure he has told you of how I came to be on board. I don't know if he mentioned that I was disguised as a cook's boy in my brother's cast offs. When he discovered who I was, he gave me this dress to wear. But, it was meant for you."

"Desmond, is this true?"

"Yes, Reb."

"You know I never wear green."

He shrugged saying, "I can't keep these things straight."

Lady Maberly turned back to Eleanor. "I am glad you have made use of

it. It certainly looks well on you!"

Eleanor smiled, and with a glance at Captain Coulter replied, "Thank you, I have grown quite fond of it!"

Tea was announced and they went into the dining room to partake of the sandwiches and cakes that the cook had prepared. Lavinia ate little, though she drank more than a couple cups of sweetened tea. Eleanor found herself happy with Captain Coulter and his sister, and approved of their easy banter.

"But, Des, you must know Mother dislikes shawls."

"Well, Reb, I do now. When did she start disliking them? It was an Indian shawl after all!"

"Ever since it rained on us. and the colors seeped from that one Donald gave her and ruined her favorite dress."

"When was this?"

"Some five years ago. Really, Des! You were there—it was just before you sailed for the first time on *Tempest*."

"Yes, well but this one was quite well made. Ah well, Eleanor made use of it."

"Indeed I did. I still have it, though I wondered if I should return it to you."

"I will be happy for you to keep it, since Mother will not want it."

"Thank you, I will. It carries happy memories with it."

Captain Coulter smiled deep into her eyes, and all went still for a moment.

"Eleanor, the time!" Lavinia's voice shattered the moment and Eleanor's gaze flew to the clock.

"Well, Mama, it is not so very late."

"Your father will be expecting us home," she insisted.

Lady Maberly rose, saying, "I will have your carriage called." She stepped out and Captain Coulter turned to Eleanor.

"I am sorry you must go. Perhaps I will see you at Rebecca's ball next week."

"I should like that!" Her mother surprised her by pulling upon her arm to get her to rise. Eleanor did so, but frowned down at her mother who feigned not to notice and instead led the way to the front of the house. Lady Maberly joined them as the carriage came round and she and Captain Coulter waved to them as they set off.

Eleanor turned to her mother as soon as they were out of sight. "Really, Mama. You were quite rude. Whatever was that for?"

Her mother sat silently for a moment. Then, she turned from the window, "My dear, I can see how it is between you and the captain. But it is not to be. Your father will never allow it. I think it best for you to send your regrets and stay home from the ball next week."

Her mother's words dashed cold water over her, and all happiness fled before them. She searched her feelings, realized they had deepened where the

captain was concerned and felt a sudden shot of anger.

"Who is Father to determine who and when I shall marry?"

"He is your father, and the only one among us with any real power."

"And his threat to you…"

"I am not thinking of myself. I will be set aside by him one way or another. I have known of his mistress for some time, and this is not the first such threat. I only want to see you marry well enough to escape him."

Eleanor sat silent, thinking over her mother's words. Her throat constricted as the last of the joy from the visit was strangled from her soul. The Warburton mansion rose up in the window's view and the carriage stopped. She rose and returned with a heavy heart to her home.

Admiral Warburton was out when they entered. Lavinia paused then, looking up the stairs before turning to Eleanor. "For all our sakes, put the captain from your mind. There are many others worthy of your consideration."

Eleanor could only nod—but her heart did not agree.

Chapter Eleven

Rain spattered and slithered down the panes of glass on the front window. Desmond stared through it, not really seeing anything. The ship rolled slightly with a swell of the ocean, and he glanced down suddenly with concern. But the ship settled as the swell passed and he relaxed.

Grabbing his oilskin and hat, he went outside and checked all the rigging and tiedowns. Everything lay solid where it had been fastened by his crew days ago. Water dripped from the brim of his hat, and he hazarded a look at the gray, formless sky before making his way back to the harbormaster's office to check for any mail.

Very few people were out in the rain. Only two barrows set up under sagging covers could be seen, and they looked ready to pack up for the day. When he reached the office, he found a couple letters, both checking to see if his ship was available for transport of goods. They had worked for both firms before, and he tucked them well inside his inner jacket to take back to the *Tempest* and check his calendar.

As he walked, a lone hansom cab drove by and on a sudden whim he hailed it. "Little Point House," he said to the cabbie and leaned back for a hasty ride along the slick streets and cobblestones. Buildings went by, draped in gloom from the constant rain and he almost did not recognize his sister's home when they pulled up in front of it.

Paying the cabbie, he strode up the short walk to the front door and rang the bell. Seconds later the door opened, and he was ushered inside.

"My goodness, Des, what are you wearing?"

Desmond looked down at the overcoat and hat he had handed to the butler. "Just my oilskins Reb. I hope you don't mind my dropping down in your midst."

"Not at all—you know you are welcome to stay here. It is a gloomy day to be alone."

"Yes, and with too little to do. My mind wanders."

"I'm sure," she cast a knowing look at him.

"Have you heard from Miss Warburton?"

"Only a very sweet thank-you note for the tea. She assured me she intended to come to the ball."

Desmond let go a sigh of relief. Rebecca observed him for a moment, then pulled him gently into the parlor and set him beside the fire. “Sit, and warm yourself. Would you like tea, or something stronger perhaps?”

“I wouldn’t mind a bit of brandy in my tea.”

She laughed. “That was always grandfather’s choice on days like today.”

“I can see why.”

“I will get you a little toddy. Just rest.”

She was gone only a few minutes before returning with a tray complete with teapot, cups, biscuits, and a decanter half-full with a languid, golden liquid. She served up the tea, splashing a generous dollop of brandy in his cup and the two of them sat companionably for a time, drinking.

After a few silent minutes, Rebecca said, “Des, are you sure you know what you are doing where this girl is concerned?”

Desmond took a drink and swallowed, feeling it warm him all the way down. “As sure as I can be, Reb. She’s the one, and I will do whatever it takes to win her.”

“Her parents are not likely to approve, brother.”

“I know. I know I am not good enough in their eyes. But, I only need to be good enough in hers.”

“Parents’ opinions do matter, Des.”

He sat silent, staring into the ghostly flames of the coal fire. “I know, but I can’t dwell on that. My only hope is to convince her, and that will only happen if she feels the same for me.”

Rebecca gave an unlady-like snort. “That can hardly be doubted. Her eyes never left you.”

“You are far more sanguine than I. I can only hope you are correct.”

She reached out to lay her hand on his shoulder. “Des, the girl cares for you. But, she is deeply frightened by something…perhaps her father. Are you willing to do what it might take to free her?”

Desmond lifted his head with a fierce expression, and Rebecca smiled. “I see that you are. You were like that when you insisted on going to sea—arguing with our parents and only old Uncle Nathaniel to back you up.”

“I just knew it was the life for me. Miserably hard at first, but worth it in the end. I can never thank our uncle enough for giving me my independence.”

“He was an old dear, a little too set on you boys, though.”

Desmond nodded, his expression grave. “I know, but I was just always so glad to be of notice to someone. I’m afraid I chose to ignore his slights to you and mother.”

“Nonsense, of course his attention was welcome. Father certainly gave us very little, and mother was spread too thin between us all and her work with the tenants.”

“They were good to us, in their own ways.”

“Indeed. It was father introduced me to Sholto, for which I am forever indebted to him.”

"You are truly happy, aren't you Reb?"

She smiled and took a sip of her lukewarm tea. "I am, Des. Immensely so. I only hope to see you as happy one day."

"I am closer now than ever before."

"Well, the ball is in just a couple days. Why don't you stay here until then?"

"I have some work to do on the ship, but I will come back tomorrow and stay for a couple days. We will be putting out within a day or two after the ball, so I will need to be back to supervise loading."

"I thought your first mate did that."

"He does, but I happen to know he is visiting his home and I am loathe to pull him away."

"Oh, Desmond. You are too kind."

"The crew would probably disagree with you on that." He stood, "Let me collect my oilskins and head back to the docks."

"I will call the carriage for you." She pulled a bell and spoke to the servant who appeared. Turning back to Desmond, she walked with him to the front windows to look out over the garden.

"You and Sholto have done wonders with this place. How long have you been here?"

"We took over from his parents when we married, about four years ago. They went to the country then, though they still come back from time to time."

"What do they think of the changes?"

"His mother is enthusiastic, but his father was rather dour about most things."

The carriage came around to the front, and Desmond kissed his sister's cheek before stepping out into the rain. He carried his oilskins with him and ran to the carriage, up the step and inside. The door was shut, and he lifted a hand to Rebecca who still stood on the front step, watching him, her smile a warm light in the darkness of his soul.

He leaned back, thinking, as the carriage rolled over the cobblestones along the streets. In his mind he went over what he would wear to the ball, and hoped his memory of the dances was still sound. He did not want to look the fool in front of Eleanor.

The carriage came to a stop and the door opened for him. He stepped out and found himself in front of the gangplank of his ship. Hurrying against the rain, he pulled his oilskins on as he went and then clattered down the steps to the galley below.

Cook looked up, eyebrows high in his scarred forehead. "Aye, cap'n?"

"Just looking for something hot to drink."

"Got some coffee made."

"Any milk?"

Cook pointed to a small crockery pot on the shelf. Desmond found a

large cup and poured the coffee from the cannister before adding a splash of the questionable milk. He stirred it and took a large sip.

"Mmm. That helps. Thank you, Cook."

He turned and carried the cup back to his quarters, then seated himself beside the windows that edged his room. The coffee burned down his throat and warmed him from the chill of the early Spring afternoon. The rain outside turned to sleet and clicked against the glass as the day wound into twilight, darkening the sea and challenging the few lights emanating from the ships along the dock.

Desmond drained his coffee and set the mug aside. Somewhere out there, Eleanor was passing time. In his mind he saw her at any number of activities. Then he imagined her on board, sitting with him on just such a day in harbor or even out on the sea. He groaned from the longing that sprang up within him and gripped the armrests of the chair as he struggled for control. He took a breath and his heartrate settled as he listened to the sudden silence of snowfall outside.

The ball could not come fast enough.

Chapter Twelve

Eleanor stood ready in palest pink silk, with her grandmother's tiny pearl necklace and earrings. Touching her hair with one hand, she turned her head this way and that to examine its appearance. Though not the fashion amongst young women, she could acknowledge that she looked well with short hair, though still grieving the loss of her tresses. Still, it was easier to care for like this.

Her mother stood waiting for her, dressed in a rather drab blue that dulled her faded brown hair. Eleanor sighed, looking at her. "Mama, have you no other gown?"

"This will do, my dear. I can step into the background and hopefully go unnoticed."

"But I would so much rather you enjoyed yourself."

"I am long past finding amusement in a ball. Come, we don't want to be late for your friends."

As they turned, the admiral entered the house with a woman on his arm. Lavinia went rigid and Eleanor looked from one woman to the other, noting the derisive curve of the other woman's mouth. Her hair glowed golden in the candlelight. Her breasts swelled upward from her low-cut bodice in a most revealing way. Eleanor stood dumbstruck, there was only one person this could be…

Admiral Warburton smiled grimly at the two of them and said, "Katherine Hellman, welcome to my home."

Eleanor stood at her tallest and demanded, "Why have you brought her here? The Season isn't over."

Katherine laughed and stepped lightly forward. Close-up she appeared older, belied by the lines at the edge of her mouth and eyes and the hard cast to her cheeks. Her gaze raked over Eleanor, and she turned to the admiral. "Oh my darling, she is just as you described! I would have loved to see her dressed as a little sailor boy!"

Eleanor's cheeks went hot and moved in front of her mother as though to protect her from the other woman. "Get out!"

Admiral Warburton stepped forward at that and held a finger up in front of Eleanor's face. "You will watch your tongue. Miss Hellman is my guest,

and you will remember your place."

Eleanor clamped her mouth shut, grasped her mother's hand from behind her, and led her out of the house and into the waiting carriage. The woman's scent still lingered in it, and her eyes sought her mother's, but she was far too humiliated to look up from where she sat.

"Mama?" she said as the carriage started up.

Her mother sat silent, eyes trained upon the window as lamps and torchlight went by. She did not answer Eleanor, simply stayed turned away. Eventually they stopped, and the footman let down the step and helped them out. Eleanor straightened her skirt and looked up at the house which sat aglow with torchlight without and candlelight within.

Eleanor's thoughts were scattered. All pleasure in the anticipated evening had flown. Tears pressed forward, held at bay by her will alone. Her mother walked beside her, a step or two behind and seemingly unable to show any interest in her surroundings.

They reached the front step and were welcomed in by Lord and Lady Maberly. Then, a deep voice caught her attention and her head lifted. Captain Coulter stood there, smiling down at her. One look at her eyes and his expression shifted to one of concern.

"Miss Warburton, are you quite all right?"

She swallowed, and the warmth of his hand on hers made her think of crying against his chest and being comforted in his arms. But she caught her breath and said instead, "We have had a somewhat trying evening. Please excuse us, we are happy to be here."

His frown deepened, but he held out his arms to escort them both into the ballroom. Lavinia did not seem to notice, staring off to the side as she was, so he led Eleanor and allowed her mother to drift in their wake, pulled along through the milling people. Eleanor turned to look at her over her shoulder, but her mother simply flapped her hand in her direction and went to the chairs lining one wall where she sat down beside a rather large lady who seemed wont to talk.

"Will your mother be all right alone there?" Captain Coulter asked.

Eleanor sighed. "There as well as anywhere else."

"Would it ease your mind to tell me what happened."

Catching her breath, she allowed herself to look up into his eyes. She did not say a word, only let him lead her down a hallway into a warm room lined with books. A tear appeared, and then another as he settled her on a large couch and seated himself beside her. Before she knew it, his handkerchief was in her hands, and she buried her face in it for a moment as more tears fell. With a groan he pulled her to him and held her close.

Despite her grief, she buried her head against him and clutched at his lapel. After a few minutes she straightened, her hands still on his chest as she lifted her head to look in his eyes. They stared at one another for a moment, before he dropped his head to claim her lips with his.

Her reddened eyes widened then closed as she allowed herself to be swept up in his kiss. His arms nearly crushed her against him, then he lifted his head to look in her eyes again.

"Miss Warburton, I must apolo…" he got no further as she reached up to kiss him once again.

Several moments later they parted. And Eleanor suddenly stood, assaulted from within by unwelcome thoughts. Conflicting emotions raged in her and she held her head in her hands, turned away from him.

Silently he rose up behind her, his hands coming down gently on her shoulders. "Miss Warburton, please look at me."

She twisted to lift her pained gaze to his. "Please understand, this has been a drop of heaven in my current hell, but it can never happen again."

"I won't accept that. Our hearts beat as one just then."

She swallowed and turned away. "For my mother's sake, it can never happen again."

Frowning now, he turned her toward him, and she did not resist. "Tell me," he said.

"My father threatens to divorce my mother unless I marry well. Tonight, he introduced his mistress, I am certain it was to underscore his intent. I don't…I don't know what to do. I love you…"

He pulled her close and held her for a moment, then she felt his chest rumble as he said, "I had never thought the admiral could be so cruel. We will think of something, Eleanor. Leave it with me. Now come, my sister will be worried."

The muted music of the ball burst over them as they opened the door and stepped back into the hallway. Desmond led her to where the couples danced and stepped into the end of the line to give her a moment to collect herself. She glanced over at her mother who still sat stonelike next to the large lady. She shifted her look to Desmond, and a small smile crept about her mouth. He reached for her hand, and she stepped into the dance.

By the time he led her from the dance floor, her heart was beating from the exercise more than grief. They went to the refreshment table, and she picked up a cup of punch, nearly draining it in one draught. He laughed as her eyes met his over the rim of the cup and he took it from her to set on the table.

"Desmond!" came a voice from behind them.

"Rebecca," he replied.

"Where have you been? The wallflowers are already queueing and you nowhere about! Remember your duty!"

"It is my fault, Lady Maberly." They watched as Desmond went up to a young woman sitting against the wall and then led her to the dance floor.

"I won't deny you seem to have some hold over him. Is your mother quite all right?"

Eleanor sighed, looking at the subject of this query sitting dispiritedly, now alone. "We had some horrible news just as we were leaving. I fear it has

affected us both."

"Oh, my dear, I am so sorry. Are you sure you do not need to take her home?"

Eleanor shuddered at the thought. "No, she is better where she is, for now. I will take her home in a while."

Lady Maberly's forehead creased, and her pretty head tilted to one side. "I will trust your judgement there. Is there anything I can do for her present comfort?"

"No, I will take her some punch. Thank you…" she watched Lady Maberly turn to another guest and speak brightly as she collected a cup and carried it to where her mother sat, staring at the ground before her skirt.

"Mama, please drink something."

Lavinia looked up, eyes lost and reached automatically for the tiny cup she bore. She drank a few sips, then handed the cup back.

"Mama, please try…"

"I am, Eleanor. Believe me."

"Yes, Mama." She sat down beside her. "There is a quiet corner in the library if you would rather sit there…"

"No, I am content here. The noise is bearable, and the activity diverts my thoughts." She lifted heavy eyes to her daughter adding, "Go and dance, my dear. It is your chance to meet people."

Eleanor's eyes went immediately to Captain Coulter who had just finished escorting a young lady to the refreshment table. His glance found her, and he smiled in her direction. She smiled back and stood to go meet him.

He met her halfway and said nothing but led her to the dance floor once more. The music swelled and they stepped off into a whirl. For one movement, his arms were about her, and she smiled up into his eyes. He grinned and said, "You seem happier now…"

"For the moment I am. You are a wonderful dancer!"

"You seem surprised," he said as he twirled her.

"I had not thought a sea captain would have time for dances."

"Ah, but I wasn't always a sea captain. Rebecca made me partner her at home and was relentless!"

"I see. And now she expects you to partner all the young ladies here."

He sighed. "Yes, that is true. I may have to leave you after this." She laughed, and he twirled her once again. "I may have to stand by and watch you partnered by someone else."

"Well, just know I would rather be with you."

"That was a very marked statement, Miss Warburton, and I am very glad you made it."

The music faded and she stood catching her breath as another man came up. He looked at Captain Coulter who cleared his throat and said, "Of course, Miss Warburton, allow me to introduce my cousin, Elias Denworthy. Elias, this is Miss Warburton."

The young man grinned and bowed saying, “Thank you, Desmond. Would you honor me with the next, Miss Warburton?”

With a glance at Desmond, she smiled at Elias and laid her hand on his arm to be led back to the dance floor. As she went, she felt Desmond’s eyes upon her and smiled to herself. The dance started, and she could barely follow the steps.

Elias was an excellent dancer, but her feet felt sluggish to her as she went through the moves. Though the music pushed her, relief flooded her when it finally finished. She looked up, and there was Desmond. She went to his arm in a daze. Another pair of eyes were on her and she glanced in her mother’s direction to see her stricken face. The light, wonderful feeling she had experienced in Desmond’s arms faded, replaced with the cold, hard reality of her father’s edict.

She could not be with Desmond.

Horror and grief washed over her, and she slowly pulled her arm free of Desmond’s. She saw his questioning eyes, but knew there were no words to explain. She simply could not be with him, and it was time to leave and take her mother home.

She moved to walk away but he grasped her hand and pulled her back. “What is this? What is wrong, Miss Warburton…Eleanor…”

She lifted her face to his, her lips parted, but no sound came out. She swallowed, glanced over at her mother, and then back. “We can’t do this. Please understand…”

“If this is because of your father…”

“He will ruin you…”

“He can’t touch me.” But a hint of doubt lay in his tone. She took advantage of it to pull her hand from his and turn away.

“Let me go, please captain.” She paused to look over her shoulder at him, then turned away. She could feel him behind her, his eyes never leaving her and while a part of her thrilled at it, her mother’s deadened face cooled all such feelings and Eleanor struggled to hang onto them until the last.

She collected her mother, and their carriage was called. She bid a hasty goodbye to her hostess and all but fled from the happy manor.

Sitting in the carriage, waiting for it to carry them back to the dark mansion ruled by her father, she cried silently. The warmth of Desmond’s arms was fading, leaving her cold and forlorn. The thought of never seeing him again made her chest tighten and her throat close off, nearly causing her to choke. For the moment, she did not notice her mother, but now she looked up to see her eyes upon her.

“I know, Mama. I know I cannot have him.”

Lavinia simply swallowed and looked away. They rode the rest of the way in silence. When they reached the house, it was nearly in darkness. Only a few candles lit the entrance. Her mother turned to her suddenly saying,

“My dearest, please know that I love you. You, alone, have been my

joy." Eleanor nodded and her mother reached out to cup her cheek with one hand and smile sadly. Then she turned and went slowly up the stairs.

Eleanor stood in the foyer for a moment, uncertain of what to do. With a sigh, she went up the stairs to her own room to take down the ribbon from her hair. As she sat in front of the mirror, a great sense of loss washed over her. All she had done to escape had been for naught—and worse, it had introduced her to the only man she could love, yet who was not to be hers.

Tears brimmed in her eyes and spilled over as she laid her head down on her arms and cried. She did not know how long she sat there, but after a while, she rose, staring at her tearstained face in the mirror. Abby came in and helped her undo the corset and she slipped into her nightdress and crawled into bed to cry herself to sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

A cold hand touched her spine and woke her early the next morning. She pushed herself up, looking round the empty room. Suddenly a cry went up down the hall, coming from the direction of her mother's room. Running steps sounded past her door and she rose quickly to see what was the matter. As she drew on her dressing gown and leaned out into the hall, her mother's door opened and a maid came out, frantically waving her arms. Eleanor ran.

"What is it? What has happened?" she called out as she reached her mother's room. As she turned into it, she saw the butler and another maid standing over her mother who lay serenely upon her bed, hands clasped upon her abdomen. Jarrell, the butler, looked up—his face white as a sheet and said,

"Your mother is dead!"

"What? No!" Eleanor pushed past the bodies clustered around and went to her mother's side. She reached down and took the limp, cool hands in her own and chafed them, leaning down to listen at her mother's chest. "Mama? Mama!"

"Miss, she left a note." The maid held out a folded sheet of paper

Eleanor pulled back from her mother and peered through new tears that suddenly appeared. She grasped the note from her and opened it.

My dearest Eleanor,

Please know that this is for the best. I am so tired, and so ready for whatever lies beyond. Please do not mourn me, I have been half-dead these many years. Now, I am simply completing the journey. I speak nothing of your father—he has done enough. Live well, my darling, and prosper.

Your Mother

Eleanor folded the note and clutched it between her hands as she stared down at her mother's still form. A small vial, empty now, sat beside the teapot on the tray next to her bed. She lifted the vial and sniffed delicately at the opening. Whatever was there, appeared to be odorless. She clutched it tight and bent to kiss the pale cheek of her mother before returning to her room. The servants parted before her as she went.

Suddenly, the front door opened downstairs and her father came in. "Jarrell! Damn me, Jarrell—where are you?"

The butler ran from the room, past Eleanor and down the stairs to take

the admiral's stick and hat. His master shrugged out of his overcoat as well, saying, "What in God's name were you doing in my wife's bedroom."

"Mrs. Warburton is…ill…"

"She's dead!" cried Eleanor. "Because of you—driving her to it! She has killed herself!"

The admiral went still, then strode up the stairs and down the hall to where the servants were clustered. One look sent them scattering to their respective stations. Eleanor watched as her father stepped up to the end of the bed, looking down upon the figure of his wife.

"Humph," he said.

"Is that all you can say? All those years she gave to you and that is all?"

He scowled down at her and shoved her aside. "The stupid woman took her own life—nothing to do with me. Now I have a funeral to prepare for." He looked at her and scowled, "Try to control yourself, do you hear me? And as for her death, we will say she was ill—no sense letting people talk. Dr. Hayes will say what I tell him to say. Now go to your room and stay there for now."

She clutched her robe around her and padded sorrowfully back to her room. Grief washed over her like a wave, and she stumbled, barely catching herself before falling. Finally, she reached her own door and fell upon her bed. Though her chest was tight, she could not cry. Her mother had been so like a ghost these past few days, and now it was too easy to believe she still roamed the manor.

She sat up as Abby came in bringing her a tray with tea and toast. "I know you may not feel like eating, Miss, but I brought some just in case."

"Yes, thank you Abby."

Eleanor noted that Abby's hair looked different, and said, "What have you done to your hair?"

Abby patted the curls showing from beneath her cap. "I cut the fringe to look like yours. Do you like it?"

"It is very becoming on you."

Abby's smile faded and she said, "The master ordered the mantua maker called. For your mourning."

Eleanor lifted a hand to her throat and nodded. Abby curtseyed and left, her face sympathetic. Eleanor poured a cup of tea and drank deeply of the hot fluid. It was strong, and mildly bitter, biting slightly and waking her from her grief-stricken stupor.

Her mother was dead.

What would her father do to her now? She went to her wardrobe and scanned through her dresses, finally choosing a dark blue. She rang for a maid to help her with her corset, and then to fasten the gown. When she was dressed, she sat at her table and waited for the dressmaker to arrive. That her father had thought about her mourning clothes did not surprise her. The appearances must be kept.

She looked down and realized she still held the note her mother had

written. Hastily, she shoved it into a desk drawer, the empty vial with it. Her father was right—the world need not know how her mother died.

From down below the front bell rang. Soon enough, Mrs. Duprey, the dress maker, was shown in and hurriedly went through measurements and fabrics. As the woman tried to interest Eleanor in the different styles, she merely glanced over them and shrugged. “Please, ma’am, I trust your judgement.”

“Of course, Miss Warburton. I will handle it.” She bustled out and Eleanor rose to go downstairs. She ignored the curious glances cast her way as she headed for the back door that led into their small garden. The light snow from two days before had long melted and sunlight peeked wanly through the clouds. She buttoned her pelisse as she walked, though the day had warmed nicely.

Following the path, she sat in the middle of the arrangement on a small bench that surrounded a large oak tree. Her mother had designed it while a young bride and overseen its construction while bearing first Charles and then Eleanor. Here, Eleanor felt close to a happier shade of her mother.

After a time, she rose and returned to the house. As she entered the main hall, she was aware of voices and followed them to the parlor. There, her father, Katherine, and Charles stood. Katherine and her father stood together, while Charles faced them.

“And I say you cannot have her here while my mother still lies in her bed.”

“I am the master of this house, and I will do as I please. You will accede to my will or be cut out.”

“You can’t cut me out…”

“I can, and am close to doing so. Do not make it even easier for me.”

Charles’s fists opened and closed at his sides. His face flushed red and he sputtered, “You’re a monster! Eleanor, you agree I am sure!”

Eleanor’s face screwed itself up and she said, “That woman cannot be here now.”

Her father smiled cruelly saying, “When can she be here, then?”

“What? Never if propriety speaks!”

“I say what is proper, and Katherine is my comfort now. She will stay.”

“We will be cut off from all good society!” cried Charles.

“There are enough who will stand by us. I have no doubt of that. Katherine has her own social circle we will be welcomed into.”

“But mother…”

“Your mother is dead, by her own hand. I am done with her and her creeping and weeping. We will mourn for one month and be done.”

“A month…” Eleanor whispered in disbelief, staring at her father.

“A month. That is more than enough. We will keep quiet during that time out of respect, but no longer. After that, Katherine will take her place here and we will see where the social cards fall.”

Eleanor turned and pushed past a chair that was in her way to escape the hated discussion. A single month to grieve her own mother? And then to introduce his mistress? Charles was right—they would be cut off from all good society.

After this, Desmond would have to forsake her.

She stumbled back to her bedroom and fell upon her bed. Her eyes were dry, there were no more tears to shed. She could scarcely believe what the day had brought. It made no sense—her father wishing her to marry well then tarnishing the family name to make it impossible. What was he thinking?

Evening came, and Abby arrived with a message from her father. "He says for you to dress for dinner."

"I have no evening wear appropriate for mourning."

"He says to wear your nicest gown, regardless."

Beyond disbelief, Eleanor pulled out a pale green silk and her grandmother's little pearls again. Abby helped her with her hair, and then she went downstairs, head lowered in shame to be in bright color while her mother lay dead in her room.

The dining room was alive with sound and light. She frowned to see some unfamiliar faces seated there. Her father caught sight of her and lifted a glass in her direction. "My daughter, Eleanor. Eleanor, these are Katherine's cousins: Lord Montmarcy and Andrew DeLaine."

Both gentlemen stood and bowed in her direction, even while her face displayed no welcome. "Why are you here?"

Lord Montmarcy smiled as he looked at the admiral and Katherine. "We are simply here to support our friend, the admiral, in his grievous loss."

"Sit down, Eleanor. You look out of place," the admiral said.

She looked at Katherine sitting in her mother's place and then at her father at the head of the table. His eyes dropped to her chair and after a moment, she sat in her own accustomed spot, eyes trained on the plate set before her and the white soup soon set upon it. Her fingers twined on her lap, and she swallowed nervously.

"Pick up your spoon, and eat like a young lady." Her glance shot to her father and then back to her plate. She picked up her spoon and dipped it into the soup, scooping up a small bit to place in her mouth. She swallowed it without tasting and conversation started up again.

"When is the funeral to be?" Lord Montmarcy asked.

"Two days' time," the admiral said.

"I shall be sure to be at my home," said Katherine.

"That may be for the best. Not long now, my dear." The admiral reached over to grasp her hand briefly before returning to his meal.

"I suppose it will be rather dull around her for a while."

"One month, DeLaine, that is all."

"We shall have to have a ball once it is over." Montmarcy placed a large bite of venison in his mouth.

Eleanor set her spoon down. Mr. DeLaine set his own spoon down and leaned gently toward her, “I am sure this all seems rather cold to you just now. Please know that we respect and honor your pain. We are just happy to come out of the shadows, if you will.”

“I’d had no idea the shadows existed until very recently.”

“Ah. Well, I hope it isn’t permanently repulsive.”

“No sense in it being repulsive at all. It is just life. I have moved on, time for everyone to do so,” the admiral stated loudly.

“Father, may I be excused?”

“No, you may stay and be social.”

“I feel I must go tend to my mother.”

“It’s been done. All that has been attended to. Nothing for you to do.”

Eleanor sat silent, not eating, not looking anywhere in particular. She felt some warmth toward DeLaine for his attempt at kindness, and yet she wanted nothing more than to retire to her own room, or rather to be engulfed by Desmond’s arms. *But surely*, she thought, *he will want nothing to do with me after this*.

She felt eyes upon her and glanced up to see Katherine’s icy blue stare. She held her gaze for a long moment before looking back down at her plate. Then, she picked up her spoon and scooped up some more soup to place in her mouth. Her eyes flicked back to Katherine whose mouth now curved upward. Eleanor looked back down, feeling her cheeks go hot as she blushed in shame for her father.

It was late before she was allowed to return to her room. Abby arrived to help her undress. She lingered a moment while Eleanor wrapped a dressing gown over her nightdress and Eleanor took a deep breath before saying, “Yes, Abby, what is it?”

“Everly and Biles, the cook, is leaving miss.”

Eleanor was silent for a moment. She had not foreseen this. “Of course. And you, Abby?”

“I don’t want to leave you. I was hoping to train as a lady’s maid one day.”

“I see. You are welcome to attend me, but I warn you that being associated with this family may ruin your chances to go to any respectable home.”

Abby looked down. “I heard, miss. But, I suppose I will take my chances. Maybe you will take me with you when you marry.”

A cry caught in Eleanor’s throat, and she struggled for a moment before saying, “I don’t know if or when that might be, Abby. Please think carefully.”

“Yes, miss.” She left and Eleanor lay slowly down. The thought of her mother lying alone just a few doors down was more than she could endure, and she rose from her bed and carefully opened the door. She could still hear sounds of talk and laughter coming from the dining room as she stepped swiftly down the hall and into her mother’s room.

A single candle burned on the nightstand. Her mother lay in her cap and dressed in her very best burgundy velvet gown. Eleanor drew the single chair closer and watched the firelight play over her mother's features.

"Oh, Mama…why?" she whispered. She heard steps on the landing outside the door and went still, only to hear her father chuckle under his breath and Katherine's hushed voice. Their footsteps faded into the distance and Eleanor was once more alone with her mother.

Chapter Fourteen

Desmond had watched Eleanor go with a fire beginning to rage in his breast. He swore aloud as her carriage pulled away. What to do? He had delayed casting off a day in order to be here, and did not like the way things had been left between them. He knew more than ever that he loved her, and yet she felt miles away and nearly unreachable. Now, morning had come and with it a plenitude of duties.

And he had a ship to sail.

There was nothing for it, he would have to return to his ship and trust his sister to plight his troth in his absence. He slammed a fist down on the table and turned to his trunk. Shutting the lid forcefully, he called to a servant to see that it was carried down to the carriage. As he stepped out of the room, he nearly bumped into Rebecca.

"Brother, are you on your way?"

"Yes, I am already behind time." She laid a hand on his arm, and he covered it with his own. "Thank you for putting up with me."

"You know Sholto and I love having you. I'm just sorry you are in pain."

He sighed. "Does it show?"

She simply nodded. "I promise to call on her and make sure your memory is alive."

"Thank you, Reb. I don't like the way we left things. Her father has come between us, and she is unaccountably frightened of him."

"Perhaps not so unaccountable. I heard some strange things this morning in a post from Maria Denworthy."

"What have you heard?"

"That her mother has died, suspiciously, and her father has brought his mistress to the family home."

"God! I should whisk her away…"

"And be arrested for kidnapping."

"Not if she came willingly. She is over eighteen…"

"Not quite of age, though."

His hands clenched for a moment. "I must go, but I shall be thinking of a way to rescue her. May I write to her through you?"

"Write to me and I will secret your letters in notes of my own. Perhaps we will get around her father that way."

He moved to the writing desk and scribbled out a note that he held out to his sister. "If you can get this to her, I will be indebted to you."

She nodded, and he kissed the offered cheek, then stepped quickly down the stairs to the waiting carriage. He glanced up at Little Point house to see his sister still standing on the front steps. He lifted a hand as the carriage pulled off.

Houses went by, now and then a man on horseback rode past them, or they paused for other carriages to pass. Soon enough he saw the dock

buildings fill the window and the carriage came to a stop. He stepped out to see his ship, *Tempest*, rising from the sparkling water. The day was glorious, all sun and blue sky—a truly rare day. And yet, his heart lay heavy in his chest.

Two of his crewmen caught sight of him and came to carry his trunk to his quarters. He trudged up the gangplank, and stepped solidly onto the deck of his ship.

"Blake!"

"Here captain." Desmond listened as his first mate relayed the status of the ship's readiness for sail.

"Cargo safely stowed?"

"They finished just yesterday."

"Thank you for supervising that…"

"That is what you have me for. Where are we bound for first?"

"Portugal, then Ireland and Southampton."

"Well, ship's ready when you are."

"Prepare to cast off." He listened as the orders were called out across the ship and went up to the fo'c'sle. For the next hour he worked with the crew to get the ship out of its slip and away from the dock and into deeper water. The wind filled the sails and the ship seemed to dance over the waves of the calm ocean.

"Perfect day, captain!" Blake said with a smile.

"Are you married, Blake?"

"Er…not exactly."

"I should think it's a yes or no question."

"Then, no, I suppose. Got a woman I see and go home to. Does that count?"

"You should formalize the arrangement."

"Bit difficult. She has a husband still alive somewhere. Scoundrel ran off and left her five years ago."

Desmond considered that. His own position paled somewhat in light of his mate's situation. Though both of them faced hindrances, at least Blake could be with his woman. He scowled into the sunshine and yelled at a hapless young sailor who had gotten his hand wrapped in a rope.

"Watch that line! You'll lose a hand that way."

He saw Blake shoot a glance at him and knew he was being harder than usual. A hand came up to pass over his face and he sighed, trying to release the tension that had built inside of him since seeing Eleanor.

He fought to master the irritation growing inside. Today, everything seemed to annoy—from the scree of the birds overhead to jocular talk amongst the men. He slammed a fist down upon the rail and a circle of silence radiated outward in response. Only the sounds of the sea and gulls could be heard.

He lifted a hand and slowly the talk and chatter started up again.

Desmond stared out over the sea, willing himself to be alert. It was one of the men who alerted him to the spot on the horizon. He whipped out his spyglass and peered through it.

"All hands on deck, bring us about!"

He listened as his orders were repeated and men scrambled to shift the ship's direction away from the growing speck. Blake rushed up and asked in a low voice,

"French?"

Desmond nodded and the two worked to relay orders to the men. Slowly, the ship turned and the sails filled full of the wind, pushing the *Tempest* onward while Desmond checked the ship in the distance.

"Well, captain?"

"It's seen us. Just a race now." The ship stayed behind them, still on their tail as they willed the *Tempest* faster.

For nearly an hour they watched with taut faces as Desmond checked his spyglass again and again. Finally, he turned to the crew and said, "We've lost them. We'll keep on in this direction for a while and correct our path before dark."

Blake clapped him on the shoulder, and he nodded in acknowledgement. They had barely missed a disastrous encounter. With no guns to protect themselves, and England once more at war with the French, the merchant ship was at the mercy of any enemy ships that happened upon them.

Desmond kept them on their current course until the sun was only two fingers above the horizon. Then, with the help of a sextant and the *Nautical Almanac*, he corrected them more to the south. Blake relayed the orders to the helmsman and sighed heavily. "How much time did we lose on that?"

Desmond shrugged, "A day or so. But we have our cargo."

"The men are relieved." If the ship had lost its cargo to the French, their pay might have been in jeopardy.

"We aren't in Oporto yet."

"True. What was a French ship doing so far south?"

"Looking for cargo to steal. They are getting bolder, we shall have to double the watch."

"Will do. We may lose a crew member in Oporto."

"Who?"

"Robert Jones. He has a girl there and wants to settle down."

"Blast. We shall have to replace him."

"Yes. I may try to get a Portuguese sailor."

"I trust your judgement on that. As long as he gets along with the rest of the crew."

"Leave it with me."

Desmond nodded and stepped down from the fo'c'sle. He stared through the sailors who crossed his path and made his way to his own quarters. The familiarity of his rooms washed over him as he went through the door,

providing a comfort of sorts. But, as he looked around, he could not help but imagine Eleanor there.

What must he do to make that real? How to rescue her from her legal guardian. The law would support the admiral in all ways, Desmond had no rights, and even Eleanor had only a few. The law could not help them…what was there to do?

He stood and made his way to the map table to plot their next course. As he looked down at the map, he felt a sense of a plan start to build inside. His brow cleared, and he thought of a way the law could help them.

Chapter Fifteen

The church seemed crowded to Eleanor. People pressed against her on all sides from where she sat next to her father. Her fingers twined in her lap, and she watched them, unwilling to lift her head to face the congregation. Her mother's coffin lay before the altar. The paid pallbearers stood ready to carry the coffin to its final resting place in the north side of the graveyard. It was a questionable place for a grave of a questionable death, and the admiral had done little to change it. Eleanor felt her throat close off, but no tears came. None were left.

The admiral rose to follow, and she went as well. Katherine had had the decency to stay away. As she walked in her father's shadow, she kept her hands together in front of her.

She paused at the sight of the gaping hole that was to accept her mother's body. The pallbearers fixed ropes to the coffin and began to lower it into the ground. Eleanor swallowed against the cry that rose in her throat as the coffin disappeared below the surface. At a word from the rector, her father leaned forward to take a handful of dirt from the mound and tossed it down. Then it was done, and her father turned from the graveside and strode off toward the waiting carriage.

She had no choice but to follow him. Working hard to match his steps without straining her skirt, she peered around the brim of her bonnet to see the long line of carriages waiting to carry the mourners to Longsdown where a funeral brunch awaited them.

Their carriage swallowed them up and started off with a jolt. Her father swore and she clutched a handkerchief in her hands tightly. Her thumb traced Desmond's initials embroidered in the corner and her heart lifted somewhat. Somewhere, he sailed, and his very existence brought her a moment of joy.

She glanced up through her eyelashes to watch her parent. His lean face was craggy, his nose imperious. Sideburns spread downward across much of his cheeks, ending abruptly at the line where his mouth pinched in at the corners. Eleanor shifted her gaze away and closed her eyes. She would never see her mother's face again.

The carriage came to a stop and her father sprang out to berate the driver about his start. She allowed the footman to help her out and made her way up

the short path to the house. Jarrell stood there, ready to open the door and welcome in the mourners. A buffet style luncheon had been set out and Eleanor took note of it before passing by to head to her room.

Once there, she unbuttoned the pelisse and laid it on her bed for Abby to replace in the wardrobe. She could hear guests arriving downstairs and knew she should go to welcome them and accept their condolences, and yet she couldn't move. Her body felt heavy, and her heart was broken. Mother gone, lover far away, and she left with a hateful man to look after her.

She sighed. A knock sounded at her door, and she stood as Abby entered.

"Miss, the admiral is requesting you come meet the mourners."

"Yes, of course. I am coming."

As she went down the stairs, she heard an unwelcome voice and frowned as she lifted her head to stare down at the foyer. Her father stood there welcoming Katherine, dressed in somber black, to the house. Accompanying her was Lord Montmarcy who was impeccably dressed in mourning as well.

Anger rose from deep within her and her chin lifted. How dare they come to her mother's funeral to gloat over her shattered life. Her feet carried her to where they stood talking calmly with her father and she said in a sotto voice,

"How dare you come here like this."

Her father's cold voice sounded in response, "Careful, Eleanor. They have come to pay their respects. If you cannot control yourself you should return to your room, or go help in the kitchen. Mayhap some employment will ease your mind of untoward thoughts."

Her glance slid from his austere expression to that of Katherine who failed to hide her smile. Eleanor felt her cheeks go hot and her hand itched to slap the smile from the woman's face, but her father's visage stared forbiddingly down on her and she held her arm stiff at her side.

Before she knew it, her father's hand shot out to grip her above the elbow and pull her firmly into place beside him. He released her only when she stood ready to welcome the next guest. Lady Farmingham clutched at her hand and wiped indistinguishable tears from her eyes with a lacy handkerchief.

"Oh my dear! Such a loss! Your mother was truly a model of pious comportment."

Eleanor tried to remember the last time Lady Farmington had called on them, but could not. The lady swept on, however.

"Such a very sudden illness…what did the doctor say it was?"

"Er…"

"A bilious attack," her father interposed.

"Oh, so horrible. My dear Ambrose, God rest his soul, suffered terribly from bilious ailments." She scuttled off in the direction of the food and Eleanor's hands were caught up by the rather pudgy, moist fingers of a middle-aged gentleman.

"Ahh! My dear young thing—such a tragedy for you to experience as such an impressionable age."

"Thank you, sir…"

"So quickly was she taken…what could possibly have ailed her?"

Eleanor's mouth opened, but she could not repeat the lie. Instead, her father pulled the gentleman along and spoke with him. Eleanor shook hands for several more minutes until the last of the mourners had trickled in. Her father instantly turned and went off into the crowd, and Eleanor went to the front window to look out.

Her eye caught sight of the post lying unattended on a salver on the hall table. She went over, sifting through the letters until her own name caught her sight. She lifted the letter and noted it was from Lady Maberly. The thought of news relating to Desmond caused her to hold it close and turn to weave her way through the bodies to the staircase. She managed to make it halfway up before her father's voice halted her.

She looked down, seeing him at the base of the staircase with Katherine at his side.

"Where are you going? We have guests…"

"My room, for a moment only."

"Five minutes, Eleanor." She waited until he turned away before climbing the rest of the stairs.

Once in her room, she split the seal and broke open the letter. A second sheet fell out, and when she picked it up, she saw it was from Desmond.

My Dear Miss Warburton,

I am grieved to hear about the loss of your mother. For such a tender heart, I know this to be a heavy blow. Know that I am with you in spirit, wishing to provide whatever comfort I might.

I must sail, and I will be gone for some weeks. I will think of you constantly and remember our brief time together. Please allow me the privilege of calling upon you when I return. Until then, my sister will be happy to further your acquaintance.

Yours,

Desmond Coulter

She read it through twice, her heart beating rapidly as she did so. The second letter contained condolences from Lady Maberly and a promise to call upon her soon. Eleanor took the letter from Desmond and quickly slipped it into her favorite book of children's rhymes while the second one she placed on her dressing table. Then she returned to the funeral guests downstairs.

Once again, she was surprised at how few familiar faces she saw. Those that she did recognize had left early, and a house full of strangers remained. And yet, her father and Katherine seemed to know them all. Her father's laughter rang out, so out of character that she started and stared.

A shape loomed over her suddenly, and she flinched before looking up to see Lord Montmarcy standing beside her. His cheeks were flushed from drinking already, and she smelled spirits on his breath as he spoke,

"Miss Warburton, or may I call you Eleanor?"

"I…would prefer Miss Warburton."

He looked disappointed. "Ah…of course. Such a short acquaintance and yet I know you so well. Your father has spoken of you often in my hearing."

"And yet, I know so little of you."

"I would be happy to correct that." He smiled and Eleanor swallowed but nodded and he swept her to a vacated settee and sat beside her.

"Well, I am the eldest surviving son. My older brother was killed in duel over some girl's honor. I won't go into that. I am an excellent sportsman and horseback rider and a member of several clubs here in London, though my family seat is in Warwickshire."

"That is not so very far…"

"No, but I go home very little. I consider London to be my home."

"Where do you live?"

"I have a townhome in Chelsea. Naturally I shall purchase a larger place when I have need, but for now it is adequate."

"Of course." Eleanor bit back a sigh.

"Do you ride?"

"I have had very little opportunity. Having lived in London most of my life."

"You shall have to visit my home in Coventry. I will teach you how to ride and show you over the estate."

"Oh…well…"

"I have already spoken to your father about it. He says Katherine will accompany you. She is a terribly fun old thing—you shall enjoy the trip."

Trap doors seemed to snap shut all around her and her mouth opened to protest, but nothing came out. How could her father send her off with his mistress to visit a near stranger's estate? Belatedly, she realized that Lord Montmarcy was speaking,

"…it was luckily hushed up, for it came to nothing. But I wanted you to know in case it was mentioned."

"Oh yes…"

"And you don't blame me! But then, how could you? At any rate, no harm no foul I said and still maintain."

Uncertainly, Eleanor rose and said, "You really must excuse me, I am not feeling all that well."

He jumped up, all solicitude, "Of course, what am I thinking. Your mother only just gone. Shall I call your father?"

"No," she said a shade too quickly. "Most of the guests have gone so I shouldn't be missed. Thank you, Lord Montmarcy."

"Do call me Richard."

She simply bobbed her head and spun to escape. She did not stop until her door shut solidly behind her. As she leaned back against it, she choked back a sob at all she had lost in just a few days. She could see already the suspicion surrounding her mother's death despite whatever her father had

done to hush it up. He had introduced his mistress into society, and the people she had grown up knowing would almost certainly ostracize them, leaving only the substratum of society that Katherine frequented—all of them strangers to Eleanor.

A light knock, and Abby peered around the edge of the door. Eleanor moved away to allow her to enter, and the maid began to unfasten her dress.

"Have the guests left?"

"All except Miss Hellman. Lord Montmarcy just left—such an elegant barouche he has!"

Eleanor said nothing, simply pulled out her new dress in deep violet. Abby helped her pull it on and then fastened it up for her. "There, miss. Do you feel up to going downstairs?"

"No, Abby. I have a letter to write. Thank you." Abby bobbed once and left her alone in her room.

She went to the small desk and pulled out a blank sheet which she had already cut to size. She mended her pen, and dipped it into the ink to begin writing:

Dear Lady Maberly,

Thank you so much for your note. Your words are appreciated more than I can say. I would be happy to receive you at any time you care to come. In addition, I pray you extend my warmest thanks to your brother whose kind words shall be cherished. Please forgive the brevity of this note, it has been a trying day though I wanted especially to write my thanks.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Warburton

She sealed it quickly and looked at it. She wanted it to go in the post immediately, so she opened the door and peered out, hoping the guests were truly gone. She saw nothing but a bevy of servants putting the house to rights, and so went down the steps to deposit her note on the small pile of letters to go to the post.

"Eleanor." She started and spun to see her father standing behind her. "What are you doing?"

"Just posting a note to Lady Maberly to thank her. She sent her condolences."

"Ah yes, there will be much of that to be done. I shall leave it to you to follow up with our thanks to all the mourners."

"Yes, father."

"And I expect when your month is over that you will be invited to Chalmondely for a visit with the Montmarcys. Since you are now bereft of a chaperone, I shall entrust you to Katherine for the visit."

"Sir, I think we should find someone else."

"What do you mean?"

"Miss Hellman's character may be held in doubt which would reflect upon mine."

His lip curled in a sneer, “I care not for the opinion of others. If I find her company appropriate, damn well should they. If they don’t, to hell with them. Katherine will accompany you.”

She swallowed and he turned as though to end the discussion and headed toward his own room in the east wing of the house. Eleanor sighed, wondering if there was any way to get out of the visit. Luckily, there was still a month before she could be expected to go, and anything might happen in that time.

Chapter Sixteen

Sunlight poured in through the open window, lighting gold in the tousled auburn locks on the pillow. Eleanor's eyes opened slowly, then squinted shut in the light. She sighed and pushed herself up, pushing hair from her face.

"Good morning, Miss." Abby turned from where she had stood to open the curtains and brought the breakfast tray over to Eleanor. "I brought your tea. Is there anything else you need?"

Eleanor reached for the cup and took a sip. "Mmmm. No, you are one step ahead as always. I spoke to father about making you my lady's maid. He agreed, so if that is still your desire, you can start."

"Miss Hutchens will have a fit." She spoke of the new housekeeper who had been brought on when much of the staff had left following the death of Mrs. Warburton.

"She will just have to find someone else."

"Mmm. That may be tricky."

"Yes, well…" She picked up a piece of toast and dotted it with marmalade before taking a bite. "I will wear the dark lilac today."

"Miss Hutchens said as we was done with mourning today." Eleanor noted that Abby had foregone the usual armband and the black ribbon on her cap had been left off. A sinking feeling filled her, and she set the toast down. She could only imagine her father's response if she showed her face downstairs in mourning.

"The pale green, then." The thought of wearing the gown that Desmond had given her brought a lift to her spirit and she nearly smiled.

Abby pulled out the gown and carried it off to be ironed. "I shall return, miss."

"Thank you, Abby." She finished her toast and drank her tea, glancing over the post that Abby had brought. She recognized the hand of Lady Maberly and quickly opened it. It was a simple missive, with no mention of Desmond and simply desiring to call upon her today.

She wrote a positive response and sealed it, then rang for a servant to come collect it. She handed it off and drifted about her room, finally pulling free the letter from Desmond and rereading it once more. She slipped it back in the book before anyone could see and was startled when a knock sounded,

and the door opened.

She spun in place, mouth agape to see her father standing there. "Father!"

"Eleanor. I wanted to make sure you knew that mourning was over."

"I know you said so, yes."

"What are you wearing?"

"A pale green morning dress. Abby is ironing it just now."

"Excellent. What shall you do for this afternoon?"

"I thought I would dress it up with an open robe and my feathered turban."

"That should do. Katherine was saying she would like to help you choose some new gowns. She has all the newest fashion plates, and she is bringing them this afternoon."

"Yes, sir. I have a friend calling on me as well."

"Well, see that you make some time for Katherine."

"Yes, sir." He swept out, nearly bumping into Abby who stood there with the dress draped over her arms.

"Excuse me!" Abby squeaked in surprise, then edged past him as he strode off. She carefully laid the dress on the bed and Eleanor shed the dressing robe and her nightgown, replacing it with a clean linen shift. Her corset followed, and Abby tightened it to her mark and tied it off. Then a petticoat, and finally the dress itself.

Eleanor sighed to see the dress on herself once again. The sight of it brought back happier times, those few days on board the ship with Desmond. She handed her little emerald cross to Abby to fasten about her neck and slipped her favorite gold earrings on. Abby played with her hair for a moment before using the curling iron to shape some of the longer locks and twine them with ribbon.

"You do hair exceptionally well."

"I had to help with my mother and little sisters, so I have some experience handling it."

Eleanor examined herself in the glass. The pale shade of the gown set off her chestnut hair and green eyes. She nodded—it would do.

When Abby finished, she cleaned up the dressing area and headed off to help Mrs. Hutchens. Eleanor stepped out of her room and toward the staircase. A door at the end of the hall opened and Katherine stepped free from her father's room wearing nothing but a flowing white dressing gown.

Eleanor stopped in shock. The woman had been a continuous presence, but there had been no hint of her staying in the house overnight, or the implications of that. Katherine simply nodded to her and drifted down the stairs toward the dining room.

Still rooted in shock, Eleanor tried to decide what to do. Continue downstairs, or return to her room? In the end, she went down and wended her way through the back of the house to the garden. There she followed the path

to the center and sat on the large wooden swing after laying a handkerchief down to preserve her gown. She swung gently to and fro for a few minutes, trying to think of what she would say when next she met Katherine. When, she wondered, would her father finally marry the woman and put the household in order once more.

Her mother's face appeared before her, not as she had been, but alive and hopeful as the image captured in the portrait that had once hung in the great hall. That girl had married the dashing Captain Warburton and was filled with excitement for the future. It had not been long before his vicious character was made known.

Eleanor thought back over her childhood and realized that for most of her life, her father had had interests well outside the home. She had rarely seen him, and her brother, she knew, had grieved that. He had always tried to do things to get his father's attention—but to no avail.

Her feet were still, and she realized the swing had stopped. She stood and walked back to the house, wondering when Lady Maberly would call. As she stepped into the house, a maid rushed up saying,

"Oh, Miss, there is a lady to see you!"

Eleanor followed in haste to the parlor where she was surprised to see Lady Maberly standing beside the fireplace. She turned as Eleanor entered and held out her hands,

"Oh, my dear! It has been so long. My, you look bright today."

Eleanor looked with shame down at her gown and said, "Father insists that mourning is over."

"Well, that gown looks quite nice on you."

"Thank you."

She laughed, a tinkling melodious sound and Eleanor could not help but smile. "Yes, I still can't believe he bought that for me!"

Eleanor's smile widened. "Well, I am happy to have it. I spent a few highly contented days wearing this on board his ship."

Lady Maberly's face went still, and she nodded. "Yes, I can imagine. He is still detained, though he sent you this…" She pulled a small, folded scrap of paper from the folds of her shawl and handed it to Eleanor. "Perhaps read it later."

Eleanor swallowed, "Of course. It isn't bad news, is it?"

"I shouldn't think so, though I did not read it. Really, now, do you suspect me of reading other people's letters?" She winked and one corner of her mouth quirked upward.

"No, of course not. Only, I worry, you see."

"Yes, well I should not think you had anything to worry about." Eleanor gestured to the settee and Lady Maberly sat.

"I can't thank you enough for coming to visit, given everything that has happened." She looked away as she said it, feeling shame warm her cheeks.

"This from the girl who cut her hair and ran off?" A voice from behind

Eleanor startled her and she jumped and spun in place to see Katherine standing there. The woman's piercing gaze took in Lady Maberly's exquisite gown and hat and a sly smile appeared.

"Really, Eleanor, your manners! Won't you introduce me to your friend?"

Eleanor flushed, and Lady Maberly paled, but she reached out a hand to Eleanor and said, "Yes, my dear. Introduce us."

"Lady Maberly, this is my father's particular friend, Katherine Hellman."

"So pleased to meet another friend of the family." Katherine smiled and curtseyed, though not so nicely as Lady Maberly. She drifted in and sat in the chair opposite the settee, leaning back to study the two of them. "I'm so sorry I interrupted. What were you saying, Eleanor?"

"Just that, like you, I am happy we have some friends."

"My cousin, Lord Montmarcy, has invited us to Chalmondly Manor in Coventry. We leave in but a few weeks' time."

"How pleasant. A visit to the country is always agreeable." Lady Maberly said evenly.

"Yes. I am hoping to encourage Eleanor to have some new dresses made before we leave, to truly set aside this mourning. We will have so much to celebrate soon."

"Oh?"

"Indeed. The admiral and I will be married within a few weeks."

"That is so soon!" cried Eleanor.

Katherine turned her head very slowly to take in Eleanor. "Well, my dear, you would have your father happy, would you not? Your mother certainly can't mind where she is now."

"But that isn't the point!"

"Then what is? It seems to me that your point is that you do not wish the marriage, and so it isn't right."

"I…I didn't say…"

"Well, what do you say? I am far too in love with the admiral to care for appearances. We will marry in a month's time and that will be the end of it."

Eleanor looked away, but caught Lady Maberly's kind eye. Katherine's cold gaze went from one to the other and then she smiled her cat-like grin. "There, we have had our little family squabble in front of guests. Do forgive us, Lady Maberly."

"Not at all."

"Eleanor, I have several fashion plates to show you. We should look them over and send your selection on the mantua maker today."

"Yes, of course, Katherine."

Lady Maberly rose, saying, "Well I must take my leave. I have been a little unwell these last few weeks, and my husband bid me not keep the horses out too long."

Eleanor stood and walked with her guest to the front door. "Thank you so

much for coming, Lady Maberly."

"It was my pleasure! You must visit me before you leave for Coventry."

It was with real sorrow that Eleanor watched her friend walk away and be helped into her carriage. When it had left, she turned from the door and closed it, finding Katherine behind her. "Well, my dear, shall we pick out some dresses for you?"

"Yes, but give me a moment, would you?" She swept past Katherine to climb the stairs and hurry to her room. Once there, she pulled out the piece of paper and unfolded it to read:

My dear Miss Warburton—Eleanor as you are to me. We are delayed returning to England and have had a difficult time of it at sea. But you will not wish to hear of our troubles. Only know that I will call upon you as soon as we are in harbor. Until then, remember me fondly,

Desmond Coulter

It was but a short note, yet she cherished every word. Quickly, she placed it with the other in the book and went back downstairs to join Katherine.

Chapter Seventeen

"Turn. A little more. There." Katherine's rich voice floated out across the room. Eleanor stood in her father's room, which Katherine seemed to have taken over, while pins were carefully placed around her bodice. The last of the dresses ordered was nearly complete.

She grimaced as a pin nearly pricked her, only to be tucked away in the material at last. The, the dress was carefully lifted off and folded into a carryall. Madame Duprey, the mantua maker, turned to Katherine and said, "I shall have this to you no later than Thursday."

"Excellent, for we are leaving Friday for an extended stay in the country."

Madame Duprey bowed her head and headed off and Eleanor quickly pulled on her simple drop front morning dress. Katherine's lip curled a little as she looked at it, but then her glance fell upon the dresses scattered over the chair and she nodded approvingly.

"At last you will be dressed as a young lady should be."

"I will need my chemisette with one or two of them…"

"Nonsense. They show your figure off to perfection. You will leave it off."

Eleanor said nothing, merely vowed to herself that she would wear the chemisette. She bent to pick up the dresses to carry off to her room when Katherine snapped, "Leave them for the servant. Who is that girl of yours?"

"Abb…Henson."

Katherine rang the bell and when the maid showed up she said simply, "Have Henson collect these dresses and put them away in Miss Warburton's room."

The maid curtseyed and scuttled off. Eleanor made to leave as well, but Katherine's voice called her back, "I want you to pay particular attention to Lord Montmarcy these next few weeks at Chalmondely."

"I will repay any attention he gives me, of course."

"That is not what I mean. It is your father's dearest wish for you to marry well, and Lord Montmarcy would accomplish that."

"Yes, ma'am."

Her father had married Katherine Hellman in a small ceremony just days

before. He was now gone on a business trip to the continent, leaving Eleanor alone with her new stepmother. Katherine, for her part, seemed to enjoy the intimacy as little as she did, and limited their time together whenever possible. Eleanor was dreading the long carriage ride to Coventry.

She slipped out and headed for her room just as Abby arrived to collect her dresses. She heard Katherine reprimand Abby for something and bit her lip. She held the door open for Abby as she came up carrying the dresses and she thanked her breathlessly.

"Sorry, Miss."

"For what?"

Abby blew out a breath. "I dunno, t'be honest."

Eleanor smiled and then sighed as she caught sight of one of the dresses. It was really cut particularly low, and she didn't know how she would be able to be seen in public wearing it. As though reading her mind, Abby said,

"A well-placed scarf will come in handy with that one."

"Which I am forbidden to wear."

Abby said nothing, but her expression communicated plenty. Eleanor pulled the trunk out from its corner and opened the lid.

"'Ere, Miss. Lemme do that." Abby began wrapping and folding the dresses with a careful manner and Eleanor sat and watched.

"There will be one more to go in by Thursday. And, I think you are going with us."

"Me! 'Ooo!"

"Well, Katherine doesn't want to dress me, and I can't dress myself in those."

"I'll be ready. I'm sure Jenkins and I will go on ahead with the cart."

"Probably." She stood up and went to the window, staring out at the road as though someone might arrive at any moment. She shook herself mentally for hoping still that Captain Coulter would come to call. She had not heard from Lady Maberly in a few days, so she sat down to pen a quick note and then headed out to post it.

As she set it on the salver with the other post, the bell rang, and Jarrell opened the door. A tall man stood there, handsome in a common sort of way and with hint of a smirk on his face.

"I'm Wendell Burton, just calling on Miss Hellman…er, Mrs. Warburton." His deep voice echoed in the foyer. A door creaked and footsteps pattered quickly along the hallway above.

"Wendell! How delightful." Katherine drifted down the stairs to give her hand to the newcomer, who took it and quickly bowed over it. The smirk deepened and Eleanor's eyebrows closed together. Katherine, however, grasped his hands and pulled him after her.

"Oh! So stifling inside. Please, let us go into the garden for our visit, so peaceful out there."

Eleanor watched she took his arm and led him through the archway that

led to the back hall and the gardens. Struck with a sudden suspicion, she went to the kitchen and took the servants' stairs up to the third floor, then into one of the maids' rooms where she went to the small, high window. Stretching up on her toes, she peered out over the gardens and down to where the marble seat lay. She was able to see two figures there, very close together, but could not see what they were doing. She could have sworn that Katherine was in the other's arms.

Snorting with disgust, she lowered down from her vantage and scurried back downstairs, making her way to the parlor. She sat at the piano forte, her fingers gently going over one of the exercises her old music teacher had pushed upon her. Pulling the music to her, she went through it until she found one of the simpler, country tunes and stretched her fingers in preparation to play. Her first chord was tentative, but the second sounded true and she slowly progressed through. Her jaw tightened with each wrong note, but she made it through and thought it a pity she had never gotten into the habit of practicing.

She played another song, only to give up as she was halfway through due to the number of mistakes she made. Instead, she pulled an Irish tune forward and started again.

The bell rang, and she stood to see who it was as Jarrell rushed to the front door. Lady Maberly swept in, and Eleanor cried out in delight, "Oh, it's you! I just wrote you a note!"

"And here I am. It had been so long since I heard from you that I thought I would come and visit."

Eleanor led her to the settee in the parlor and sat beside her. "And how are you feeling?" Lady Maberly's stomach seemed a little more pronounced this time and Eleanor smiled to see it.

"Lord, tired, but well. Just think there are five more months of this."

"But worth it in the end."

"Indeed. Now tell me, for Desmond will want to know, how are you?"

"Well, truly. We are preparing for a trip to the country to stay with one of Katherine's cousins."

"And are you looking forward to this?"

Eleanor turned expressive eyes to her friend and sighed. "I must go, that is all."

"Oh, my dear!"

"My father expressly wishes me to accept the attentions of Lord Montmarcy."

Lady Maberly pulled back a bit and peered into Eleanor's face. "And do you wish for his attentions?"

"You know the answer to that. It only makes me miss Captain Coulter the more."

"Well, my brother will be relieved to hear that."

Eleanor smiled. "When can we expect your brother to be back in London?"

Lady Maberly sighed. “We cannot be too sure. He indicated late next week, but that depends upon the sea as always.”

“Yes, of course. And his travels have gone well?”

“I understand they had a close call with a French privateer, but that they managed to outrun them and were safe.”

“It is hard to think of your brother running from anything!”

“He knows when to risk all, and when the fight is not worth the outcome. He takes his crew’s safety quite seriously.”

“Oh, of course. He is everything a good and true captain should be.”

A little silence fell, and Eleanor sighed. Lady Maberly was about to speak when voices could be heard coming from the back of the manor. Soon, Katherine and Mr. Burton entered the parlor and seemed overly startled to find it occupied. The four stared at each other for a split second before Katherine remembered to let go of her friend’s arm.

“Wendell, do come sit and meet my friends. Lady Maberly, and of course you know Eleanor.”

“I believe this is my first time meeting both of these ladies.” He bowed to each of them, and Eleanor smiled saying,

“No, we met at the door, just a little while ago.”

“Ah. Well, perhaps I did, my mind was elsewhere. Do forgive me.” He smiled beguilingly and she tried to smile back. Lady Maberly inclined her head then gripped Eleanor’s hands.

“I must go, my dearest, but I will send your warm regards on to my brother.” A shadow passed over Katherine’s face at mention of Desmond, but was gone in an instant. She raised a languid hand to Lady Maberly and then turned back to Mr. Burton.

Eleanor watched her friend go with real sorrow. Katherine daintily cleared her throat before saying, “Really, Eleanor, you look as though you’d lost your only friend.”

Biting back a retort, Eleanor simply turned and nodded to them before heading back to her room. She heard muted laughter coming from the parlor and stepped faster, wishing to escape what she was certain was an assignation.

Once the door to her room closed securely behind her, she went to the children’s book and pulled out the letters she had secreted there. In them she read of Desmond’s steadfastness, and she marveled that he could hold her in any sort of esteem despite her current situation.

Slowly she replaced the letters in the book and set it back on its shelf. She went to the window, peering through the arms of the tree to see snatches of sky beyond. She could hear a large limb scratching the wood outside her window as the breeze blew and made a mental note to tell the gardener to cut it.

Feeling trapped in her room, she picked up a book from the shelf and curled up in the chaise beside the window to read more of Mrs. Radcliffe’s stories. She must have fallen asleep, for she started awake when Abby burst

through the door,

"Miss! The admiral says to call you for dinner!"

Eleanor rubbed her face and stood, staring around her in panic. She was not dressed for dinner! Abby quickly pulled out her pink satin and undid the gown she was wearing to help her pull it over her head. Then the new gown was lowered and fastened up and Abby straightened her hair before Eleanor headed out and trotted quickly down the stairs.

She entered the dining room, trying not to breathe hard and enduring her father's stern eye. "Where the devil were you?"

"I fell asleep while reading…"

"Reading? Some novel I suppose."

"Yes, sir."

He looked over at Katherine and said, "What time were you planning to leave tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Eleanor looked up.

"Yes." Katherine replied. "Your dress arrived and there is nothing to keep us. I am sending our maids on ahead in the morning, and we will leave sometime in the early afternoon."

"I…see…"

"Pleasure-bound again, I see." The admiral said with a smile at Katherine.

"I only wish you could go."

The admiral seemed to consider, and Eleanor thought she saw a flicker of panic in Katherine's face. Then he reluctantly shook his head saying, "I am needed here. I shall think of you often…"

She smiled seductively at him, but broke eye contact quickly as she attended to her soup. Eleanor felt sick at the woman's duplicitous ways, but could not bring herself to feel sorry for her father. He had brought it all down on himself.

Eleanor finished eating and rose from the table. Suddenly wide awake, she wanted to be free of the house and its inhabitants. Crossing the foyer, she opened the front door and stepped out into the world.

Carriages and cabs went by on the street fronting the house. She glanced over at the neighbors and saw the family returning from an outing. The children fussed crankily and had to be carried up the walk to the house.

She smiled and walked along the street, thinking back to the time she had run off and followed this very street down to another making her way toward the docks. It had been dark then, too. She wondered if she would have time to make it to the docks if she hurried.

Stopping, she mentally shook herself. There would be nothing gained from going there. The *Tempest* was out to sea with Captain Coulter on it. Slowly, she turned and headed back toward the house. As she walked, she paused beneath a lamp and stood for a moment in the circle of light emanating from it. She saw a familiar carriage approach and it was forced to stop behind

two cabbies who were arguing. She could see the Duke and Duchess of Marlsworth inside and they glanced over at her just as the carriage started up again. She smiled and curtseyed as they went by, but stood astonished as they averted their gazes and continued on.

Straightening, she headed back to the house. The snub cut deep, as it represented to her a lifetime of acquaintances and friends now lost to her—and all by her father's actions. Anger flared within her, anger and sorrow for all she had lost.

She turned up the walk that led to the house only to see her father thrust open the door and stand glaring at her.

"Where have you been?"

"A walk."

"You are not to be trusted out of the house. Take your turns on the house grounds from now on."

"Yes father." She dodged past him and went up the stairs to her bedroom. Shutting the door behind her she felt a moment of panic, as though she were suddenly imprisoned. Sitting at her dressing table, she pulled out the book with Desmond's letters and read them through once more. At least here was someone who still wished to know her.

Morning dawned sullen and dreary. Eleanor rose before Abby called for her. She burst into the room and breathed a sigh of relief to see her up and awake. "Oh, Miss, we must get you dressed for Mrs. Warburton insists that Ellen and I go on ahead. The cart has already pulled 'round, and the trunks are being loaded."

Eleanor rose and quickly donned the corset and bodiced petticoat. She would be wearing the dark blue linen and her taupe pelisse corded with black. She went back and forth between bonnets, and finally settled on a plain black one that she had worn for mourning. It was far too fine to be completely forgotten. She fished a blue rosette out of her crystal tray and pinned it to the side of the bonnet, just to tie in the color of the dress.

Dressed now, with her pelisse lying across the foot of her bed and the bonnet ready on the dressing table, she went down to breakfast as Abby hurried off to meet the cart at the servants' entrance. Eleanor found her father in the dining room sitting before an empty plate of crumbs with his newspaper open before him.

"Good morning, Father."

"Eleanor." He did not look up.

She collected a plate and helped herself to some eggs and a piece of bacon, then added some toast. Both strawberry jam and marmalade were there, and she chose strawberry for her toast. She sat some distance from her father and began to eat.

"Why are you sitting away over there?"

She looked up. "I just sat down so as not to disturb you."

"How can I talk to you when you are all the way across the room?"

"I did not know you wished to talk to me." She picked up her plate and moved closer to his seat and he fixed her with his eagle stare.

"I want you to put yourself out there on this trip. No slinking about in libraries reading and such. Mingle with the others, let Lord Montmarcy get to know you."

"Yes, sir."

He grunted as though satisfied and turned back to his paper. Eleanor ate a few bites, then ventured, "Sir, I saw the Duke and Duchess of Marlsworth yesterday and they turned away from me. Why would that be?"

"I don't think you need me to tell you that some people are going to avoid us."

She pushed a bit of egg around her plate with her fork. "But they have known us all my life…"

"Indeed, it is unfortunate."

"We have had no invitations since mother died."

"People assume we are in mourning."

"Surely not with a new marriage…"

He put the paper down and fixed her with a glare. "Are you trying to bait me into an argument? I have nothing further to say on the matter." He stood and marched off, his boots sounding heavy on the wooden floors. Eleanor sighed and set her fork down. Slowly she pushed back and rose from the table.

"I guess I'll slink into the library and read novels and such," she said to no one. She made her way across the main hall to the corridor that led to the library. Once there, she retrieved a book and sat in the window seat clutching it to her and staring out the window. The slightly musty smell of books filled her nostrils, and the sound of birds hopping about the bushes rang against the glass of the window. She leaned her forehead against it and closed her eyes, bitterly forlorn.

Afternoon came and she found herself in the carriage with Katherine seated across from her. She smiled often to herself, but did not acknowledge Eleanor. They had travelled nearly an hour before Katherine's gaze fell upon her.

"That color suits you better than your previous pelisse."

"Thank you." Katherine's own pelisse was a vivid blue chosen for the way it brought out her eyes, though Eleanor thought they seemed rather lackluster today. She wondered why, but knew better than to ask.

They made good time despite the rain which insisted upon falling. The driver pulled them into a small inn at Barnet where they took a late supper and retired. Eleanor disliked the thought of sharing a bed with Katherine, and scrunched herself up on one side of the bed so as not to touch the other woman. Katherine simply smirked and took full advantage of the space not claimed by Eleanor.

Morning found them up early and dressed. Breakfast was simple but filling and then they were on their way once more. The day was less dreary

and though the clouds remained, it did not rain. Eleanor endured yet another day of tedious silence and little to do except watch the countryside creep by.

It was late on the third day that they arrived at Chalmondely. The housekeeper met them and saw them to their respective rooms. Eleanor was happy to see that Abby had arrived safely and already unpacked her trunk. She had ordered a bath and soon had it ready for Eleanor who stepped in with a sense of deep relief.

"Oh, Abby, this is heavenly after three days in the carriage."

"Yes, Miss."

Eleanor noted a shift in Abby's tone and sharpened her gaze on her. "What is wrong, Abby?"

"Miss, I don't think this is a respectable place."

Eleanor sat up, water dripping from her breasts and arms. "What do you mean?"

Abby fiddled with the button of Eleanor's dressing gown. "One of the footmen said some very unpleasant things."

"Such as?"

"He wanted me to warm his bed tonight. I told him I'm not like that, but 'e kept on."

"What was his name? I shall speak to Lord Montmarcy about it."

"No, Miss. Please don't. Just watch yourself. Goings on and such seem acceptable here."

Eleanor leaned back, but her pleasure had evaporated. Quickly, she washed up and stepped into the toweling that Abby held out for her. A clean nightgown felt heavenly after three nights of sleeping in her shift. She wrapped her dressing gown around her and sat beside the low fire. Though it was Spring, the weather had remained relatively cool for the time of year. A chill ran through her at the thought of being forced to stay in this place for another few weeks.

"Where is your room, Abby?"

"Up with the maids."

"Well, if you are bothered, come down here and I will keep you safe."

"Yes, miss." Relief sounded in her voice. She gathered up the travelling clothes and wheeled the bath to one side of the room before leaving.

Eleanor sat staring into the fire for several minutes. Then, with a sigh, she climbed between the covers of the bed. Creaks and whispers seemed to brush against her, all unfamiliar and strange. The flames flickering about the coal in the grate reached ghostly fingers upward, clutching at the air. Everything disquieted her and put her on edge.

The door creaked open and she shot up, only to see Abby clutching a blanket and shutting the door quickly behind her.

"Oh, Miss! Can I sleep here tonight? I'll lay down on the floor, anything!"

"What happened?"

Abby sniffed and sat in the chair beside the fire. “Ellen and I went to bed as usual, but someone knocked on the door, an’ she got up, an’ then went out with whoever it was. I kept hearing footsteps out in the hall, an’ I got frightened.”

Eleanor pointed to the chaise, “You needn’t sleep on the floor, Abby, lie down on the chaise. Tomorrow I will have a word with Lord Montmarcy.”

Eleanor watched Abby curl up under her blanket on the chaise and felt a little better for having her there. She sighed into her pillow and was soon asleep.

Chapter Eighteen

The tide carried Desmond into port at London one day when the sun was high. Clouds blanketed the horizon, spreading ever closer and threatening to bring rain. The crew moored the ship and began unloading the cargo brought from Portugal and Ireland. Prime Madeira in large kegs, potatoes, and a flock of fine-wooled sheep. Normally, he would have taken livestock to Portsmouth, but the buyer had wanted them brought into London to be taken north into the country.

Desmond spent some time closing the deals with the rest of the buyers and then paid out the crew. By the time he was done with the bank, it was late in the day, and he headed for Little Point.

Rebecca welcomed him warmly and he sat down in the parlor and accepted the cup of tea she pressed on him. "I know you would ask about Eleanor, but she is in Coventry."

"What is this?"

"Her stepmother has taken her there to visit a cousin. Lord Montmarcy."

"I wondered who the admiral would try to marry her to."

"She could hardly resist…"

"Of course not—hard natured man that he is. Where in Coventry?"

"An estate called Chalmondely, from what I can find out."

Desmond considered. "I am at liberty for only a week…"

"Three days there, one to see her, three days back."

"And where do I find a horse to take me?"

"You don't, you take our carriage."

"What! Driver, footman, horses, all to escort me on a fool's errand?"

"I have already cleared it with Sholto. He agrees you should see the girl."

Desmond looked askance and Rebecca relented and added, "All right, I had to convince him. But really, Desmond. If you had seen her face when that awful woman declared she must go."

Still, he considered the expense for his sister's husband. "It is a handsome offer, sister, but…"

"But nothing—if you hurry you can sneak into the ball they are holding. She sends me the date along with her thoughts for you."

"She thinks of me?"

"Brute! Of course, she does. Go to her!"

He stared at the ground, then lifted his gaze to her and smiled. "All right, but I will pay the driver and the footman myself."

She rolled her eyes then signaled for a passing servant and said, "Have Captain Coulter's trunk loaded onto the carriage and have the grooms ready it immediately." Desmond went to the writing desk to pen a note to his first mate with instructions for the loading of the new shipments after the hold had been cleaned.

Less than an hour later, he found himself ensconced in his brother-in-law's fine carriage headed through the busy London streets. They stopped and started repeatedly, and left him thinking longingly of the sea. By nightfall they had escaped the city and had progressed through the countryside a distance before stopping at an inn. As he went to bed that night, he could only imagine what the next few days would bring.

By the time the carriage pulled into Coventry it was late in the afternoon on the third day. The driver stopped for directions and then chirruped to the horses. Desmond watched the buildings pass by and then they were turning onto a long drive that wound through forest and pastures.

Chalmondely stood aglow in the dying light of the day. A small lake before it shimmered red and reminded Desmond of blood. He fought a chill that claimed his spine and sat back to consider.

He was an uninvited guest, and though he had dressed in his best that morning in anticipation of calling, he had been travelling in his clothes all day and had no idea of whether he would be welcome. But, his mind recalled Eleanor, and all questions were pushed aside.

He was moments from seeing her, and that was all that mattered.

The carriage pulled up behind a line of other carriages and he barely waited for the footman to let down the step before climbing down and striding off toward the front door. He found an elaborate bell pull that sounded within. After a few minutes, the door opened, and a butler regarded him.

"I am Captain Desmond Coulter, come to pay my respects and call upon Eleanor Warburton."

The butler regarded the card Desmond had proffered and stood back to allow him to enter. Stepping inside, he whistled silently to himself at the grandeur of the foyer. A huge chandelier hung from an exquisitely painted ceiling and glittered with dozens of wax candles.

A large group of elegantly dressed people drifted about, and Desmond remembered almost too late that this was the night of the ball being hosted by Montmarcy. He wandered through the crowd, searching for signs of Eleanor. They seemed to be moving into a large, well-lit room where a quintet now played. He slipped in and quickly caught sight of her.

She stood in the shadows, wearing a dress that barely covered her rounded breasts. She seemed conscious of the fact and half-crossed an arm in front of her, before letting it slowly drop. One eyebrow raised, he wove

through the milling people until he came up before her.

Her eyes lifted and then widened, and she cried out, "Des…Captain Coulter."

He grinned and grasped the hands that moved toward him. "I would prefer you called me Desmond."

She blushed, then said, "How did you find me?"

"My sister. I am told you wrote her of there being a ball tonight. I decided to drop in and see you."

"You rode three days for a ball?"

"I rode three days for you."

She was silent, simply staring up into his eyes with glowing happiness. His gaze dropped to her gown and she blushed harder. "I know. My stepmother had it made for me. I am on display and it is most unpleasant."

The music started up and a man appeared at Eleanor's side. "Come now," he said, "We must open the ball." He cast a rather unfavorable look over Desmond and led Eleanor away. She craned her neck behind her to cast a beseeching look at him.

Desmond followed and watched as the dance began. Montmarcy danced well—a little too well. A girl standing beside Desmond sighed, saying, "Lucky girl to have Lord Montmarcy to herself."

A thought struck Desmond and he glanced over at the girl to say, "Would you care to dance?" He had a feeling that in this crowd, dancing with a man unintroduced would not be frowned upon. The girl looked at him slightly askance, taking in his somewhat travel-worn appearance and then shrugged and took his proffered arm.

He timed it so that they would be close to Eleanor and her partner. At one point when they switched partners, he had her in his arms for a moment and was repaid with her glowing expression turned full on him.

As soon as the dance ended, he turned to Eleanor and held out his arm. Without taking leave of Montmarcy, she reached for him and clasped his arm with both hands. Neither looked away from the other as they took their place for the next dance.

The music swelled and they stepped off. Eleanor barely noticed what her feet were doing, she only had eyes for Desmond. For his part, he could not look away, even if it meant bumping into the couple to their right.

He apologized, and then Eleanor broke into a giggle that caused him to smile. "I suppose I need to watch better."

"I suppose so, I am just so happy you are here."

"How long will you be here?"

"As long as my stepmother wills it. I have a feeling we won't leave until I am engaged to Lord Montmarcy."

Desmond's grip tightened and he looked up with barely disguised fury. "Is that your wish?"

"You know me better than that. But I don't know what to do…"

He caught sight of Katherine moving toward them and glanced around for an escape. As they spun close to the edge of the dance floor, he pulled Eleanor after him and out onto the single, large terrace where a few couples had secreted themselves.

Moonlight shone down on them from the cloudless sky. Desmond's gaze dropped to her lips that had just parted in a soundless sigh. Without thinking, he bent to claim them.

"Eleanor!"

They broke apart as Katherine's voice split the night. The other couples looked up from their activities to see what was going on and then looked away. Katherine strode out onto the terrace and ripped Eleanor from Desmond's arms.

"How dare you demean yourself like this."

"I haven't demeaned myself in the slightest."

She turned furious eyes onto Desmond and said, "You must leave."

Eleanor tried to pull free from Katherine, but her grip was like steel. Desmond glared at her, but knew he had no right to take Eleanor from the place. Instead, he leaned forward until his face was only inches from Katherine's.

"Do not think you have won here. I will have what is mine." Then, he turned to look once more at Eleanor before walking away.

Chapter Nineteen

Eleanor watched Desmond disappear through the crowd with tears in her eyes. She turned a furious expression to Katherine,

"How dare you speak to him like that!"

"How dare you fall into his arms like some common whore."

"You would know about that!"

The words were barely out of her mouth before Katherine's hand struck her cheek, hard. Eleanor gasped in shock and pain, one hand coming up to cup her face. She jerked free from her stepmother and ran, weaving through the crowd until she reached the stairs where she climbed quickly up to her room. She closed the door behind her and stood leaning up against it.

After a few minutes a light knock sounded, and Abby peered around the door. When she caught sight of Eleanor's reddened and inflamed cheek, she quickly came in and peered at it, before saying,

"I'm going to get some cloths and cool water. I'll be back." She was gone several minutes, but returned with a bowl with a cloth over it. She set it down and dipped the cloth in, wrung it out, and then waved it in the air to cool it for a moment before folding it and pressing it against Eleanor's cheek.

"Thank you."

"Who did this?"

"Mrs. Warburton."

"Why?"

"She found me with Captain Coulter."

"The captain was here?"

Eleanor nodded, sniffing against the silent tears that coursed down. Abby wet the cloth again and Eleanor took it from her, holding it gingerly to her face. Abby sat back on her heels and regarded Eleanor.

"What are you going to do?"

Shaking her head, Eleanor wiped her eyes with the cloth. "I don't know. I have no one to turn to. No relatives, all the people I knew growing up have turned from us. My only friend is Lady Maberly, and she is with child. I can't involve her and expose her to my father's wrath."

"Something will come along…"

Eleanor tried to smile at her maid, but winced at her sore cheek. "Go to

bed, Abby. I'll be all right."

"We'll get you out of that awful gown first." She stood and began unfastening it, helping Eleanor to step free from the filmy skirt. Her corset came next, and Eleanor sighed with relief when the nightdress was lowered over her head.

"There, now. I'll leave you. Keep that cloth on your cheek."

Eleanor smiled. "Yes, Abby." She waited until the door closed before moving to the window and staring out over the lake. Somewhere out there, quite close, was Desmond. She could almost feel him holding her once again, his lips upon hers. A little cry broke from her, and she leaned against the glass and cried, her tears streaking the pane.

The cold window felt good against her bruised cheek, and she sat there for a while, watching the darkened grounds for some sign of Desmond though she knew he would not be there. But he had been—he had traveled all this way just to see her, and the thought warmed her through.

After a while, though, she felt chilled and climbed gratefully in between the sheets. Shivering lightly, she remembered the feel of Desmond's lips against hers and felt a thrill go through her. Somehow, they would have to find a way to be together.

Morning came in the shape of Abby bringing a breakfast tray in to set on the table beside the bed. "Here, miss. Kidneys and eggs, toast and marmalade. And tea."

Eleanor stretched and yawned, pushing her hair out of her face. "Oh Abby, thank you. And thank you again for last night."

"Never mind, all in a day's work. The house is full asleep—some people left only a few hours ago!"

"Did you get some of the cake?"

"Ellen save me a slice. Gone a bit stale before I got it, though."

"Come to think of it, it was a bit stale last night." She reached up to touch her bruised cheek and added, "How does it look?"

"Quite red, miss. What are you going to do?"

She shrugged. "I shall have to show my red face below some time today. I doubt that anyone will notice or care."

"That Lord Montmarcy might."

"Mmmm. I wish we could get away, Abby."

"You did it once before."

"And look how well that turned out. Caught within two days and forced to come home, tail between my legs."

"Still, not many women would have done it."

"For obvious reasons." She stood saying, "I will wear the pale green cotton gown today."

Abby rose and fetched it from the wardrobe. "Is this the one you got from the ship?"

Eleanor nodded. It had been altered slightly to fit her form and height,

but the feel of it was still the same and brought the smell of the sea and the feel of the *Tempest* to mind. She picked up the shawl she had secreted away in her trunk and smiled at Abby,

"I'm going out into the gardens." She turned and stepped out of the room, listening for a moment to see if anyone was about. Then she hurried down the stairs and into the large hall before going down the side hall toward the gardens.

As she went, she saw a figure in an elegant ball gown appear on the stairs. She frowned and watched as the figure went past her and out the front door, looking rather disheveled. Eleanor's gaze was drawn to the upper walkway where Lord Montmarcy stood. His face was inscrutable. He stared down at her for a moment before turning and disappearing into his room.

Eleanor continued on her way to the gardens. A woman in black with an apron and chatelaine paused as she came upon her and asked, "May I help you?"

"I'm looking for the garden…"

"Ah. Down this hall and to the right. You'll come to the right door."

Eleanor nodded and followed her directions, eventually coming to a heavy door that required some weight to open it. Then she was on a path and wending her way into an elaborate, if limited, garden.

Straight edges described the hedges that rimmed the walls of the garden. As tall as Eleanor and arranged in a geometric fashion around the center where a fountain gurgled. She wound her way through until she reached it and stood staring at the ripples and waves on the water. Her mind instantly went back to standing on board the *Tempest*, watching the ocean all around, and she felt a stab of homesickness.

Strange, she thought, *that I miss the ship but not my real home*. And she didn't…not really. She preferred it to her present location, but more than anything she wanted to be with Desmond, on his ship.

Looking down, she moved to a marble bench and sat down upon it, still staring at the water. A throat cleared and she looked up, startled, to see Lord Montmarcy standing there. Her back straightened, and she blushed as his eye roved over her form and he smiled.

"Here you are. You're up early."

"So are you."

"I haven't gone to bed, yet." His eyes slid to her, and the corner of his mouth crooked upward.

She turned away, staring at the water and clinging to the memory of Desmond. He came nearer and sat beside her, so she scooted over to make more room, but he held out a hand saying, "None of that, we can share a garden bench."

"Yes. There is plenty of room if I move over."

"You don't need to go anywhere…" he reached out and gripped her arm, pulling her closer. She struggled free and stood, rubbing her arm where he had

held it.

"I think I shall return to the house." She spun on her heel and ran, his laughter following her as she went.

Once back in the house she went to her room and curled up on the window seat, hugging her knees. Her cheek still felt a little swollen, and now her arm hurt where Montmarcy had grabbed her. She had never been manhandled, even by her father, and felt demeaned and humiliated.

A knock sounded and Abby entered. "Oh, miss. I didn't expect to see you!"

"It's all right, Abby. What do you need?"

"I was going to iron your dress for tonight."

"I see." Abby came closer and peered at her face.

"You're still a bit red."

Eleanor nodded. "Yes, I thought so. Were you quite all right last night?"

"Yes, miss. Ellen and me barricaded the door!"

Eleanor chuckled. "I'm glad you had the means."

Abby went to the wardrobe and pulled out the new ivory silk gown. "I think this is my favorite of your new gowns," she said with a sigh.

"Well, you can have it one day."

Abby grinned at her and laid the dress gently over her arm. She curtseyed and stepped out of the room.

Eleanor watched her go. Her maid was the closest thing she had to a friend. Everyone else had forsaken her.

Except Desmond.

She closed her eyes. Resting her head on her arms she looked out the window in time to see a carriage pull up. It looked like a shabby hired carriage, and she peered closely at the figure that came out of it.

Tallish, brown hair with hints of red in it and a distinctive way of walking with a slouch. Her brother, Charles!

Quickly she jumped up and raced down the stairs to where he now stood in the foyer.

"Charles!"

"Eleanor."

"What are you doing here?"

He pulled her into a hug. "Got an invite from Montmarcy—met him gaming a few weeks back. Said he knew my new stepmother and offered to have me down. So I came. Didn't expect to find you here."

She wrinkled her nose at the smell coming from him and pushed back to stand away from him. His hair hung in greasy strands and his clothes were stained. He noted her look and said, "I'm a bit of a mess. Been rather short on cash. Was hoping Montmarcy could see me straight."

"You're here to borrow money?"

"Just until Father sees me right."

"Father said he is going to cut you off."

"I know he has threatened that, but..."

Just then, Lord Montmarcy came from the back of the house and stopped upon seeing Charles there. With a glance at Eleanor, he came slowly forward with a watchful air. "Warburton."

"Montmarcy."

"What are you doing here?"

"Came to take you up on your offer to stay a bit. Then I found my family here."

"Indeed. Well, I think we can accommodate you. Hurle!" He motioned to one of the servants. "See that Mr. Warburton is put into the Emerald Room and have a bath prepared for him."

"Might need some clothes laundered as well."

"I can loan you some things until it is done."

"I say, that would be excellent."

"Hurle, have Lassiter provide Mr. Warburton with clothes to wear while his own are tended to." Then he nodded, still watchful, and went up the stairs toward his own rooms. Charles grinned unpleasantly after him, causing Eleanor to frown.

"What is it, Charles. Have you told the truth?"

"Eleanor, why must you always doubt me. Now, I'm off to have a much-needed bath and most importantly—something to eat." He followed Hurle up the stairs and turned in the direction of Eleanor's room, leading her to deduce that the Emerald Room was near hers.

She sighed. Charles' appearance, though not unwelcome, simply complicated things. She did not know how well he would get along with Katherine, and Montmarcy had not seemed at all pleased to see him.

Slowly, she wandered through the great hall, looking at the paintings there of unknown individuals in their past fashions. She wondered if any of them had looked like their painted forms, or if the artist had employed his license to beautify their features.

She found a parlor that contained a piano forte and sat down to pick out a lonely tune. The piano was in poor tune, and she stopped after only a few chords. A harp stood on the other side of the room, next to a small harpsichord. In a desultory manner, she wandered through the room, plucking a few strings of the harp and working out the same tune on its strings. So intent on her study, she did not see the entrance darken.

"What are you doing there?" Katherine's voice shot across the room.

Eleanor straightened and stared at her, watching as she wended her way across the room until she stood before her. She reached out and touched the still-red cheek and gave a catlike smile. With a little shove of her hand, she released Eleanor's face and turned her head slightly toward the main house.

"I understand dear Charles has arrived."

"Yes. Have you seen him?"

"Not yet. I am in no rush to see the insolent, spoiled boy."

Unable to argue, much as she wanted to, Eleanor kept her mouth closed and did not answer. Katherine stretched out onto an elegant settee and draped on arm along the back. “Well, play.”

Eleanor withdrew her hands. “I have no training with the harp.”

“The harpsichord then.”

Hesitatingly, she rose and moved to the seat of the little instrument, running her hands over the keys and thinking. Remembering only one song in the moment, she played an Irish love song, happy to find that this instrument, at least, was in tune.

When she finished, Katherine clapped slowly and said, “Bravo. All those years of practice have not been wasted.”

Eleanor said nothing, simply stood and turned to leave.

“I did not give you leave to go.”

“May I go?”

“No. I wish to talk to you. Sit down.”

Eleanor sat on the edge of the nearest chair and waited. Katherine’s eyes never left her and she simply regarded her for a moment. “Montmarcy likes you.”

“I see.”

Katherine waved her arm to encompass the house. “All this could be yours.”

All Eleanor could think of was the *Tempest*. “I do not desire fancy houses.”

“You are a ridiculous little girl if you think you don’t care for wealth and security.”

“Not if it comes at a price.”

“A price. What price?”

“The man it is attached to.”

Katherine laughed, peals ringing off the elaborately carved ceiling. “Oh my dear, as though that matters. Give a man what he wants until he tires of it, then you are free to do as you wish.”

“Is that what you’ve done with Father?”

She sobered suddenly, and ugly glint in her eye. “We won’t discuss your father. I speak merely of generalities.”

“I don’t care for your generalities. May I go?”

Katherine’s stare did not waver, but she brushed her away, and continued to stare at the harp. Eleanor cast a glance behind her, but Katherine had not moved, and she did not hesitate any longer. All but running to escape, she scurried to the back of the house and out into the garden.

She instantly regretted not bringing a pelisse as the weather had changed, and she wrapped her arms around her, unwilling to return to the house. The sound of gravel crunching met her ears, and she turned the corner to find her brother pacing about the fountain. He now wore clean clothes and his hair was still wet. He paused in mid-step when she appeared.

“Eleanor! What are you doing here?”

“I’m just out walking. Why?”

He sat down on the marble bench and grasped his hair in both hands. “Father! He’s a beast. He writes that he will not help me. How is a man supposed to live with nothing?”

“Can you find a profession?”

He looked at her with disbelief. “I am a gentleman. That is my job. It is in Father’s interest to see that I am able to live as I should.”

“But, Charles, Father uses us. I must marry and bring him exalted connections, you must stand out in his career. Our status is built on his accomplishments alone. We have no right of birth.”

“I beg to differ there—I believe we have some claim to exalted birth. Our mother…”

“Our mother was the daughter of a gentleman, no more. She had no title.”

“How can you speak of her so? She is dead!”

“I speak only the truth which is not demeaning. I loved our mother…”

“Then help me destroy the man who destroyed her. Father must go!”

Eleanor shrank back in horror. “What do you mean? Charles—you can’t…”

“I can, and do, and will. Just watch, Eleanor.” With that, he turned and stalked away.

Chapter Twenty

Desmond stared out the window of the carriage. He had not slept well since seeing Eleanor, and now he found himself angry and frustrated. He had hated leaving her behind, but had no right to take her away.

Yet.

The dingy outskirts of London approached and soon the city had swallowed them up. They stopped and started with traffic until they reached the quiet street where Little Point sat. He stepped free of the carriage and stretched before walking up to the house.

The door opened and his sister stood there, her hands fluttering about as if she didn't know if she could touch him. He pulled her into a brief hug and said only, "Thank you."

"What happened?"

He told her, briefly and ran a hand over his face. "I need to get back to the ship."

"I"ll have the carriage take you."

"No, horses and driver are exhausted as I. I will take a cab."

"Oh, Desmond. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to steal that girl away from them and marry her before they can stop me. That is, if she will have me."

"Surely there's no fear of that…"

"There's always a fear that they will twist her mind around like theirs. Who knows what they are threatening her with."

"When will you be back?"

"Nearly a month. We are off to Oporto, Portugal, again, then Ireland."

"Please be careful!"

He kissed his sister's cheek. "I will. Goodbye Reb."

"'Bye, Des."

He collected his bag and called a cab. All he could think of was a warm bath and a night in his own bed. The streets went by slowly until Desmond nearly stepped down to walk it himself. Finally, they arrived at the dock, and he saw the masts of *Tempest* rise as they neared it.

Willie Blake was there, waiting, as he came aboard. "Sir, good to have you back."

"Is the cargo stored?"

"Yes and no. The wool arrived, but one load of it didn't make it. The owner is begging us to wait for it."

"How long do they estimate it will take?"

"A day, maybe two."

"The crew?"

"All accounted for."

"We can wait, I suppose. Give me time to rest up from my travels."

"Yes, sir."

Desmond checked over the ship, then went to his quarters. Lighting a stub of a candle, he bathed and changed into a clean nightshirt before climbing into his own hanging bed. By the time the candle burned out, he was asleep.

Next morning rose dreary and wet. A cold, sleety rain fell making the deck slick and Desmond had to watch his step. The crew finished loading the last of the wool and a late export of dried peas. Then they turned the yardarms and let down the main sails as they pulled free of the moorings.

The sea lapped and swelled dark and gray beneath the constant rain. The oilskins kept them relatively dry, but the stinging cold only worsened as the day went by leading to chapped, stiff, and reddened hands.

Desmond huddled over the magnetic compass, gauging their heading. He called out a bearing to the helmsman and the ship turned slightly to starboard. He walked by as the seamen were coiling the ropes and nodded satisfied to himself. All was going well despite the dismal weather.

And yet, he was dissatisfied. He loved his life on the sea, travelling from one port to another and living on board ship. But he wanted more…he wanted a wife. And not just any wife, one who would share his life on the *Tempest*. And that was what he did not know…would Eleanor welcome that life?

He knew she had been happy travelling with him for the short time she had been on board. But to live there—with few to no servants and plenty of work for all. Would the daughter of an admiral used to an easy life, wish for that?

Or, would he need to begin spending more time in his cottage in Lyme. And is that where Eleanor would prefer to live?

He did not know, and did not think he would have the opportunity to ask. Somehow, he would need to get her free of her father and stepmother and in a position to choose her life. Only then could he put forth his options for her. Would she want what he had to offer?

He heard the dinner bell and went to his cabin to await his supper. The galley boy brought his tray in and set it on the table. Desmond lifted the lid and smelled the pease and salt pork. Not his favorite, but he could stomach it. He wondered how Eleanor would handle it. He wished he could conjure her up to just talk with her about this thoughts and plans.

The days passed smoothly despite the weather remaining glum. At least

it warmed appreciably as they worked their way south along the coast. Soon enough, after a matter of days, they came in sight of their end, Oporto in Portugal.

The ship docked and the crew began to unload their goods. Desmond stood on the fo'c'sle, watching the men working on the dock. The bales of wool had been taken off, and the dried peas and barley were being loaded into wagons as he watched. He had already been approached about taking a large load of madeira wine back to England. He was waiting to hear from a cloth seller about taking a nearly a hundred bolts of cloth.

He looked out over the docks, thrilling in the movement and mixing of cultures and language. If only Eleanor was there to share it with him.

He stepped down and made his way into town. The crew would be scattering to the winds for the next few days, drifting back and forth as their pockets allowed them. He had a hot meal in sight and an afternoon of wandering through the barrows and shops.

As he wandered, he found a small shop hidden in the shadow of a large inn. He stepped inside to find a small, cramped, jewelry store. As he looked at the items on display, he saw a ring with a small, but beautifully cut emerald flanked by swirls of gold and two tiny diamonds.

It brought Eleanor firmly to mind and he caught his breath. It would make a perfect wedding ring.

But, he had not asked her yet. He did not know if marriage to him was even on her mind. And yet, the ring sat there, green as her eyes and gold like the highlights in her auburn hair. Before he knew what he was doing, he had bought the ring, and it's carved wooden box sat now in his pocket.

He headed back to the *Tempest*. The ring having claimed all his free cash and he did not need to be tempted to spend any more. Once back on ship, he placed the ring in his desk drawer, opening it to look it over once more.

Now he was impatient to return to England and ask for her hand. He would reason with her father and make him see how well suited they were… how much he would do for her.

He snorted to himself. As if the admiral would listen to his protestations. He was back to the problem at hand—how to convince Eleanor's father to give his blessing. He closed the drawer and locked it, keeping his present safe. One way or another she would wear his ring.

If she wanted it.

He went out onto the deck to watch the stars rise over the ocean. The ship creaked occasionally, but otherwise was silent. Then, from below he heard the raspy voice of Cook and made to turn when a blow struck him from behind. He spun and his elbow connected with a jarring force, just as something pounded into his back. The sound of bones cracking filled his ears as did the scuffle of the silent attackers.

Lunging upward, he struck one of them with his fist and heard them grunt in pain. Twisting in their grasp he fell free and made to right himself

when the cosh came down on his forehead and all went dark.

"Cap'n?"

Desmond opened his eyes, but his vision was obscured. Slowly he lifted a hand to touch his face and it came away sticky.

"Don' move. Doc's almost 'ere."

He laid still and took a mental inventory of the damage, but pain overwhelmed him. Steps sounded on the gangplank and the young galley boy, Donal, called out, "Doc is here."

Desmond felt hands upon him, and a mellow voice say, "Tell me what happened."

"I was attacked by at least two men."

"Three run away," said Cook.

"Get me some damp cloths so we can clean up this mess," said the doctor and the galley boy ran off. The doctor's nimble hands reached Desmond's ribs and he grunted with pain. The doctor quickly removed his shirt so he could examine the damage.

"Got some busted ribs, I'd say."

"Why is your English so good?"

"I'm the naval doctor from the neighboring ship."

Desmond started, "Naval? Which one?"

"*H.M.S Stanfield*."

Desmond's mind raced. Could the admiral's reach be so far? Could this be in response to his attentions to Eleanor?

"Ahh!" The doctor's hands pressed firmly as he washed away the blood from Desmond's face. "As I suspected, nasty cut on your forehead. It will need stitches." Several rough wipes of the cloth later, the doctor's case creaked as he pulled out his suturing kit. "Lucky your hair will hide most of the scar."

Desmond endured the prick and pull of several stitches on his forehead, gritting his teeth against the pain. Finally, the doctor bandaged it up and Desmond was certain he looked ridiculous with the bandage wrapped about his forehead.

"What about the ribs?" Desmond asked as he sat up, gasping in pain.

"Can't do much. I'll wrap them, but you'll need to take it easy. I would suggest you not sail for a couple weeks."

Desmond closed his eyes, free now of blood. Two more weeks away from Eleanor.

Was that, perhaps, the point of all this? To keep him away from her while they worked their poison?

He pushed himself to standing, grimacing from the pain of innumerable bruises and the stabbing of the broken ribs. His head spun and he felt the world tip for a moment until he righted himself and stood with the doctor

supporting him.

"Take it easy, son. You need to be in bed."

Desmond nodded, "Thank you, sir."

"Not at all. We sail in two days' time. I'll check back in with you before then."

Desmond made his way to his cabin, Cook stumping along behind him to see that he got there without falling. Once there he collapsed gingerly onto the seat by the windows and looked out. The galley boy set to lighting candles for him, then asked,

"Do you need anything, sir?"

"No, Donal. Thank you."

He leaned back and considered that he might have to sleep where he was for a few nights as he didn't think he could climb into his hanging bed in his current condition. He sighed, but stopped at the stab of hot pain that pressed onto his chest. Breathing was difficult, and his head throbbed. He could feel the sting of every single stitch and his body ached in several places. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to drift off.

When he awoke he found a blanket had been draped over him and he smelled fish stew. Looking around, he quickly located the dinner tray that had been left at hand on the low table. He drew it towards him and ate the lukewarm stew. A quarter of a ship's biscuit lay there and he crumbled it into the remaining gravy and ate that too, surprised at how hungry he was.

He thought the pain had actually gotten worse, and he leaned back carefully, exhaling as he did so. He stared out the window at the ship docked beside them. Anger surged through him at the thought that a couple of English sailors might have attacked him. He suppressed the thought, however. There was no way of knowing who had done this.

A knock sounded and Donal came in to collect the tray. Desmond looked at him and lifted the blanket. "You?" Donal nodded and gave a ghost of a smile. "Thank you," said Desmond.

The boy left and Desmond was alone in the candlelit room to consider. They were scheduled to sail within days, and he intended to keep his schedule —injury be damned. He would return to England and find Eleanor to ask for her hand.

And then what?

Her father would not approve, what did that leave? Elopement? Would she agree to such a thing?

His head pounded so he leaned back and tried to think of calmer things, but his mind went to Eleanor on his arm, on his ship…

In his bed.

He gasped at the flood of desire that went through him at the thought. Groaning, he forced himself up so the pain would drive all such thoughts from his mind. He took a step, and then another, making his way to his desk. He opened a drawer to find paper and found the little pack of Penelope's letters.

Frowning, he lifted them out, forgotten as they were. Pulling an empty chamberpot over, he held the corner of the packet over a candle until it caught on fire. Then he laid the burning packet in the crockery pot and watched it curl into black flakes that broke into ashes. When it had done, he sat back. Now there remained only one thing to do…

Find Eleanor and ask her to marry him.

Chapter Twenty-One

Rare sunshine flooded down from a mostly clear sky. Eleanor sat in the parlor, a book on her lap as she watched a pair of swans on the small lake in front of the house. Chalmondely was beautiful, but she was heartily sick of it.

Rising from the settee, she made to go to the library when the front door rang. She paused to see who it is as the butler hurried past, straightening his waistcoat. The door opened to reveal Katherine's friend, Wendell Burton. She shut her mouth which had dropped open and turned as a voice rang out,

"Wendell! How charming!" Katherine entered from the east wing and went to him. He bypassed the proffered hands and encircled her with his arms. Her pleased expression changed with a glance at Eleanor, and she pushed away.

"Now don't be naughty—I am a married woman!"

He caught her glance at Eleanor and hemmed. "Er, yes of course. Old friends and all that."

"Come, let me show you around."

"You sure Montmarcy will be quite all right with me coming along?"

"It was he told me to invite you."

They walked in the direction of the east wing, leaving Eleanor standing in the main hall. She made her way to the library which was the only place she could feel remotely at home. Chalmondely had an excellent collection of books, and she had even found a few novels that the dowager Lady Montmarcy had secreted in there before her death.

She selected a book and chose a chaise beside a window to curl up on. A large writing desk shielded her from view, and she nestled down to read one of Mrs. Radcliffe's works. The grandfather clock ticked calmly in the corner, and she was about to fall asleep when voices jarred her awake.

"Shh…" Katherine said, then giggled.

"Who's going to hear me?" Wendell said in his liquid voice.

"That Eleanor is always creeping about…she is like a cat."

A silence followed, then a sigh. "I want you…" said a throaty voice she barely recognized as Katherine's.

A low chuckle, followed by a giggle. "Well, I don't think I need to make you wait any longer…"

Katherine groaned, and Eleanor was near panicking. Desperately she tried to think of a way to let them know she was present, but Katherine's throaty cry rose, and she heard the unmistakable sound of kissing. Then they broke apart and Katherine said,

"Not here. Your room."

Footsteps faded down the hall and Eleanor breathed out with relief. She was no longer interested in reading and simply wanted to escape to the grounds if at all possible. Anything but to be in the house just now. She laid the book down on the table and crept from the library, peering around the corner to make sure no one was there.

She trod swiftly to the side door that led to the gardens and traveled down the path to the center of the main garden. Breathing quickly, she stood for a moment trying to catch her scattered wits. When her heart rate had slowed, she sat on the marble seat and stared at the fountain.

A shadow crossed her, and she looked up. Lord Montmarcy stood there smiling down at her. The sun stood behind him, casting his features into shade and giving him an unpleasant look. He cocked his head and gestured to the seat.

"May I?"

"Of course."

He sat down, a shade closer than she was comfortable.

"How do you like Chalmondely?"

"It has every comfort."

"Yes, but does it make you comfortable?"

"I own to a preference for home."

"Home is always preferable. But supposing this became your home?"

"I do not see how that is possible." Every nerve crackled with the direction his words were taking. She twisted her fingers together and waited.

He reached over and laid a hand on hers. "If you consent to be my wife."

She stood. "Sir, please do not speak so. This kind of talk is very unpleasant to me."

He stood also and tried to draw her into his arms. She struggled for a moment and his grip tightened and he bent over her, holding her still in his grasp.

"I've been patient, but I am done. I have already discussed our marriage with your stepmother who represents your father in this. We will be married, your dowry will come to me and will get me out of a particular spot I am in. All you have to do is acquiesce. Or face your father and explain why you won't. I don't think he will be as patient with you."

Eleanor struggled again, but he bent and kissed her hard, bruising her mouth. She screamed against his lips, but he only pulled away, laughing. He released her and she ran from him back to the house and her room with the hope of a locked door.

A stitch in the side stabbed her and she slowed to a walk, holding her

stomach with both hands. Tears of fear and frustration threatened but she fought them back. *Beast!* Was all she could think. *Oh, Desmond…where are you?*

She passed the parlor on her way to the stairs and heard voices. Katherine called out to her as she started to pass by, and she paused.

"Yes?"

Katherine looked at Wendell and burst out laughing. "Yes? Just like a mouse! Come here, I understand I am to wish you joy?"

"I don't know what you mean?"

"I understood Montmarcy was going to declare himself."

"He did, but I refused."

Katherine's eyes narrowed. "Refused? I think you know how your father will take that."

"I cannot help how my father takes it."

"Nevertheless, I think some time in your room contemplating such a decision would be warranted. Go to your room. Stay there until you hear otherwise."

"But…"

"Go!"

Eleanor climbed the stairs and stumbled to her room. She went inside and slammed the door shut behind her. She was a prisoner, likely to be held until she gave in to Montmarcy's demands. *But surely*, she thought, *they cannot force me. I will simply tell the vicar when he comes that I have not agreed to this*. But then…whose side would the vicar take? Her father had power in London…

She would have to run away again. But she could not do that in Coventry —there was nowhere to go. She would have to get back to London. But how to do that?

Time passed slowly in the room. The two books she had secreted there were soon read. The sun set outside, and Abby brought her a dinner tray. She ate automatically, unable to taste much of what was on her plate.

A knock sounded and she looked up, heart skipping a beat. Her brother came in, glanced around, then sat down on the chaise.

"I say, you're in it, aren't you."

"I don't know what you mean."

"This whole engagement thing with Montmarcy."

"There is no engagement."

"That's not what I heard. Katherine is writing our father about it."

"Then I shall tell him about Burton."

"Fat lot of good that will do. Katherine will deny it and claim your ill will is speaking. Who do you think Father will believe."

Eleanor looked away. Charles sighed and leaned back. "Really, sister, isn't this much ado about nothing? You will have to marry one day. What's stopping you from stepping into Lady Montmarcy's shoes?"

"Lord Montmarcy."

Charles laughed. "He's an ass but not so bad. There are worse fellows out there, trust me."

"There are better ones as well."

"Say hey…have you met one? Is that what all this is? You think you have a better prospect?"

"I speak only of generalities…"

"Oh, you can tell me…come now, Sister. Who is he?"

"There is no one…"

"Hmm. I don't believe that somehow. But listen, look around you. Chalmondely is quite the prize—more than I shall ever have unless father pops off soon. If there is no one else, they why not give Montmarcy a chance?"

"I tell you I won't marry him." She slammed her fist down on the armrest of the chair.

"All right…calm down. But I warn you, they have decided for you. You will find it hard to go against the lot of them."

"But I don't love him…"

Charles laughed again. "Love? Is that what all this is about? Good lord, you really are the simple schoolgirl still, aren't you?"

She lifted her chin and stared at him. "I am not a schoolgirl."

He leaned forward suddenly, "Well then, listen. No one else will have you. Your exploits of running away were a nine days' wonder and all good society has closed ranks against us thanks to Father's infatuation with Katherine. Unless you wish to stay under Father's thumb for the rest of your life, I suggest you marry Montmarcy."

She sat stunned. "Oh, Charles."

He leaned back. "You think on what I have said. It may not be love's fancy dream, but it is a hell of a lot better than life with Father."

"You got away…"

"I've paid for my freedom. Poverty is blind and humiliating. I am enough of a good big brother to want you to keep away from it."

He stood and stretched. "Guess I'll go see what my future brother-in-law has planned for the evening. Think, Eleanor."

He was gone, and Eleanor stared at the door that had closed behind him and shuddered. Though they had never been close, she had somehow thought her brother would see her side of things.

Glancing at the desk, she thought about writing a letter to Lady Maberly, and then wondered how she would get it past Katherine who would no doubt be watching for something like that. Somehow, she had to get word to Desmond that she was being held against her will.

But then, a plan came to her. A way to get to London and put them all off their guard. If she had the courage to pull it off…

Chapter Twenty-Two

Desmond stood on the poop deck and ducked as the spanker boom moved to the other side. He trotted down the stairs, wincing only slightly as his busted ribs stabbed him. The wrapping helped, but nothing could quite stop the pain.

He pointed out a rope that wasn't coiled properly and set a seaman to work on it, then pointed to a spot on the deck that had been missed and set a boy on to that. Finally, he climbed the stairs of the fo'c'sle to look out over the bow. He pulled his spyglass up and perused the horizon, but saw no suspicious ships.

Dolphins raced in the bow wave, and he allowed himself to be distracted by their antics for a moment. But then he turned his attention back to the horizon—England should be showing up soon enough.

He tapped the rail with his hand and glanced up at the sails. The wind was coming out of the south and the sails were filled, but he ship could only go so fast. He did not know why he felt so impatient to be back in England.

His mind reeled around different outcomes where Eleanor was concerned. In one scenario he imagined her married off, then scolded himself for thinking such. She would never marry where her heart was not…he just wasn't sure where her heart actually was.

A pain in his forehead reminded him that he needed to have his stitches removed. It had been nearly two weeks and now they itched unbearably and pulled painfully from time to time. Seeing that nothing untoward was happening, he trotted back toward his quarters.

Once there he pulled out the surgeon's kit his father had given him. Desmond was still not sure what his father had supposed would require such tools, but he had found it in a shop and thought a ship needed a doctor's bag full of instruments. Now, Desmond searched through it for some scissors and forceps.

Once he had them, he positioned himself before his shaving mirror and meticulously dug each stitch from where it had sunk into the skin and then sliced through it with the scissors. Carefully, he drew out the thread and dropped it onto the table. After a few more minutes, he had them all pulled free and noted his appearance was much improved.

A knock sounded and he turned toward the door. “Come.”

Blake opened the door and said, “Captain, there’s something you should see.”

Frowning, Desmond followed him up onto the poop deck where his first mate pointed out toward the north. Lifting the spyglass, Desmond sighted on the object and focused for several tense moments.

“I think it’s another merchant ship.”

Blake let loose a sigh of relief. Desmond studied his compass and map and corrected their heading using the sextant. He stood silent on the fo’c’sle, contemplating the distant horizon as the day darkened to twilight.

Blake came to his side as the sun set. “Dinner is ready, captain.”

“What? Oh yes, coming.”

“I’ll keep watch while you eat.”

“Yes, thank you Will.”

Desmond headed off toward his quarters where the tray waited on his dining table. He uncovered it and stared through the bowl, unseeing. Slowly, absently, he ate. Lifting the tray, he carried it down to the galley much to the astonishment of Donal and Cook.

“I’m sorry, cap’n…”

“No, Donal. It’s fine. I just wanted to come down and check on things. All good?”

Cook nodded, eyes wide and Desmond lifted a hand and went back up onto the main deck. Night had fallen rapidly, helped along by the sheet of clouds that now spread over the sky, blocking out the stars and the moon.

The first drops struck him about the head, and he withstood the rain for a few minutes more before going in to find his oilskins. He reappeared as the wind picked up and he barked out to the men to haul up and secure the topsails. The men scurried to position and braced themselves to pull on the ropes that lifted the sails to the yardarm. Then men would have to climb the masts to secure the sails by hand. Dangerous in the rain, near suicide in a thunderstorm—they would have to hurry.

“Haul in the spanker!” he shouted as the wind whipped the large sail at the stern. Men surged to follow the order as the helmsmen struggled to maintain the direction of the rudder. Lightning cracked in the distance and Desmond shouted more orders above the wind to hurry the men that were aloft.

As the wind switched directions and tore at the sails, he ordered the main sails secured. Soon they sat upon the sea, sails bound and ropes taut, riding the chopping waves. Desmond winced as lightning struck out a mile away. The rain pelted down upon him as Blake rushed over.

“Sir, we are all battened down.”

“Get below, Blake.”

“Not without you.”

“That was an order!”

"Sir, you are still injured. You need to rest."

Desmond moved the arm that had been bracing his broken ribs. "Damn it! All right, but see that the men stay safe."

Stomping in anger for his situation, he wound his way to his quarters. Water seeped around the door where the rain lashed against it, and he laid a cloth down inside the door to sop it up. His oilskins went on the hook beside the door, leaking more water onto the floor.

He stood at the windows and stared out at the storm. The ship had moved into the heart of it, and now lightning lit up the sky in jagged bolts. He could feel the concussive force of the thunder vibrating against the glass and it filled him with a sense of purpose, as though Eleanor's heartbeat had reached out to him over the miles.

Outside, the wind lessened as the storm moved on and farther to the east. Rain fell in thin sheets now, lashing the ship more gently. He wanted to let the sails fly and race the wind to England, but that would be foolhardy, and he sat back in his chair and watched the raindrops chase each other down the panes of glass.

In his mind he went over the attack. He was fairly certain that the admiral had somehow orchestrated it. Now he needed to not only find a way to get Eleanor free from her father, he had to avoid getting killed in the process. He rubbed the spot where the cosh had struck him. His eyes closed against the pain starting up again in his brain.

The storm moved on, leaving a slate gray expanse of clouds over a steel gray sea. Desmond came out of his quarters and ordered the sails loosed. He checked the compass and the map before correcting the heading of the ship and they were underway once more.

Hang on, Eleanor, he thought. *I'm coming…*

Chapter Twenty-Three

Eleanor woke as Abby opened the curtains letting lukewarm light into the room. Pushing her hair out of her face, she sat up and frowned at Abby.

"Mmm. Why?"

"I brought you breakfast—they had strawberry jam and scones."

"Hmm. You're forgiven."

Abby chuckled and brought the tray over. Eleanor sighed as she sipped her tea and looked out the window.

"How quickly could you get us ready to leave?"

Abby snorted. "Half an hour if I hurry. Are we going home?"

"I am going to do something that seems wrong, but just trust me, Abby."

"Miss?"

She ate some toast and forked a bite of eggs into her mouth. "I'll wear my pale green cotton dress."

"Miss Katherine hates that one."

"I know, but I need it to fortify me." Abby went to the wardrobe and pulled out the dress and laid it over a chair. Eleanor finished her breakfast and drained her tea before standing and pulling the nightdress off. Abby was ready with the chemise, then the corset and bodiced petticoat before lowering the dress over her head and fastening it up.

Eleanor examined herself in the mirror and then sat as Abby began brushing her hair out and pinning it back.

"It is at an awkward stage," she said, pulling out a few long pieces to curl around her face.

"Do what you can with it. I'll be putting a bonnet on to go outside later anyway." She endured some tight pulling and fastening until Abby stepped back with an uncertain expression. Eleanor turned her head this way and that before sighing. "It will have to do."

She stood and paused at the door, calling up her courage before heading out. As she stepped down the stairs, she heard voices coming from the parlor and headed there, her heart beating quickly. As she entered the room with its painted cherubs looking down from the ceiling, she thought her courage would fail her, but one thought of Desmond and she continued on.

"Eleanor," said Katherine, "I forbid you to wear that dress." Montmarcy

frowned as he glanced over her, and Eleanor blushed.

Looking down, she frowned and then said, "I shall tell Abby. I did not notice what she dressed me in today. I have come to a decision."

"Oh?" Katherine's eyebrow arched and Montmarcy sat up a little.

"Yes." She turned toward Montmarcy and added, "I have decided to accept your offer of marriage."

Katherine's mouth fell open a little, but she regained composure quickly. Montmarcy rose and came to her, his smile a smirk Eleanor wanted to slap off his face. Instead, she allowed her hands to be caught up and to be drawn closer. Before his lips could touch hers, however, she turned her head so they only brushed her cheek.

"Well, my dear. This makes me the happiest of men."

Eleanor smiled the lie up into his eyes and said to herself, *Forgive me, Desmond.* Katherine rose and gave her a frosty hug before saying, "We shall have to order the wedding clothes this instant."

"Indeed—I do not wish to wait," Montmarcy said as he continued to smile.

"I only ask that we be married from London," Eleanor said as she allowed his hands to swarm over hers.

"Of course, whatever you want. Then a honeymoon in the Lake District, or Cornwall, or Wales…no, not Wales."

"I will be content with whatever you plan. May we return to London today to begin planning?"

"I want some assurance that you will not change your mind once we get there," interposed Katherine.

Eleanor shrugged. "What do you suggest I do?" Then held her breath as they looked at one another.

"I suggest we publish the engagement in the newspaper. You won't be able to wiggle out of it without serious loss of face to yourself and your father."

Eleanor shut her eyes. "I could never disappoint father."

Katherine seemed uncertain still, but looked at Montmarcy and raised her eyebrows, "Well, I suppose we shall be leaving for London. Will you join us or come down only for the wedding?"

"I shall take care of some business here, then come to London. I need to sell the townhouse and look at buying a larger place once I have the dow… once we are married."

"I had best go tell Abby to start packing," Eleanor backed and headed for the door, silently breathing out in relief.

"I will tell Ellen the same and have the carriage and the cart readied." She rang the bell, then when the butler approached said, "Have my maid begin packing and our cart called." She then fixed Eleanor with a hard stare and said, "I hope you are not playing false with me."

"No, stepmother." Then she turned and tried to keep from skipping up

the stairs. They were going to leave Chalmondely! When she reached her room, she found Abby had already packed most of her gowns. She pulled out one of the least repulsive of the new gowns Katherine had had made and Abby helped her into it. The precious green dress went into the trunk.

"This should mollify her," Eleanor said under her breath. Looking at Abby, she said, "Make sure to get your own things packed as well. Oh! Abby, we are going home!"

Hours later, after a light luncheon, their trunks and servants were homeward bound on the cart, and they were ensconced in the carriage and rolling down the long drive to the main road. Eleanor did not breath normally until they had turned onto the road and truly left the estate.

She glanced over at Katherine who looked a little distressed. Concern overrode dislike and she asked, "Are you well?"

"A little disordered. Nothing to worry about."

Eleanor hesitantly turned from her stepmother and looked out the window instead. Suddenly Katherine pounded on the roof of the carriage and as soon as it stopped, she opened the door and was sick on the road outside.

Wiping her mouth with her handkerchief she climbed back into the carriage and leaned back against the seat. Eleanor, moved to pity, asked,

"Ma'am, what can I do?"

"Nothing." Katherine's voice was hoarse. "Just leave me be."

Eleanor turned away, staring once more out the window as the carriage started up again. She glanced surreptitiously over at her stepmother to see her quite pale with her eyes closed. She looked away and bit her lip, not knowing what to do. In the end, she simply did as she was told and left her alone.

Katherine was mostly back to herself by the time they reached the inn for the night. Though she ate little supper, she managed to flirt with the innkeeper's son and finagle them the best room for the evening.

Next morning, she rose pale and when asked simply said she had not slept well. She refused breakfast and seemed in a hurry to get underway, so Eleanor drank her tea and ate a scone quickly. Then they were once more seated in the carriage and trundling down the road.

Katherine was distant, more so than usual, and Eleanor left her to her thoughts. She had plenty of her own. She needed to write a letter to Lady Maberly and explain the announcement that would be coming through the papers in London. But then, she did not know if she would be allowed to correspond with her again. She had been forbidden at Chalmondely.

Two days later, they pulled up in front of her father's house. Katherine rushed to the admiral's side.

"Oh, my darling! It has been too long!"

"My sweet, sweet girl—it is good to have you home!" Eleanor stood patiently by while they embraced until her father's eye fell upon her. He frowned a moment, then said, "And you, finally seeing the light. We will see how fast we can put a wedding together. Maybe not fast enough, eh? Ha!"

Eleanor went white at the implication and simply asked to be excused. She found her room as she had left it, and Abby in the midst of unpacking.

"Oh miss, it is good to be home."

"Indeed. I am so happy to be back in London."

"I never 'ope to see the country again. Give me London every day!"

"It is drab and dreary here, though, at times. And the dirt from the roads can be awful…"

"Nothing like the dirt in the country. No, you won't talk me out of it." Eleanor laughed, then peered through the branches of the tree outside the window. The family next door must be indoors as there was no sound or sight of them. She turned away and considered her room for a moment. Abby lifted a dress and said,

"There's a stain on this one. I'm going to try and get it out for you."

Eleanor nodded and watched as she left, then sat down at the desk to write a letter. She wondered if Katherine would be overseeing her letters as she had at Chalmondely. Being very careful in her wording she wrote a short letter to her friend:

My Dear Lady Maberly,

We are just returned from our turn in the country. I must own to being very happy to be back, not the least reason in that I hope to see you before long. You will be pleased to know that I keep very hearty, as you would expect from spending time in the country.

I hope you keep well and that all is going as it should for you and your family. Please pass my greetings on to your brother who I hope is keeping safe during his travels…

…I will end now with a plea that you will visit me as soon as you are able. Your affectionate friend,

Eleanor Warburton

Looking it over, she did not think there was anything that Katherine could object to, and she sealed it up, wishing she could have said more and asked about Desmond. But that would certainly not pass censure and she very much wanted to at least let Desmond and his sister know that she was home.

She carried the letter downstairs and into the main hall. The only person in view was a maid polishing the bannister, and Eleanor went past her to the foyer where the letters to go to the post were piled. She buried hers under a couple others and turned only to find Katherine standing there watching her.

"What are you doing?"

"Just sending a note to my friend, Lady Maberly. And you?"

"I have no need to explain myself. We need to go look at fabrics for your trousseau today."

"Of course, I shall be ready when you say."

Katherine slid her catlike gaze to the clock and back. "One hour."

Eleanor nodded and edged past her to return to her room, wondering how she was going to get out of the wedding. She had a plan, but did not know

when she should put it into motion. More than anything, she wanted to see Desmond…

An hour later she descended the stairs dressed in one of the new afternoon dresses. She stood in the foyer waiting for Katherine who finally swept down toward her in a flurry of fuschia. The carriage waited and Eleanor followed Katherine down the short walk to where the footman stood with the door open and the step down. He helped her stepmother in first, then held a hand out for Eleanor.

The carriage felt chilly, and she pulled one of the rugs over her lap, letting it dangle to cover her lower legs. She fidgeted with the edge of the blanket as the carriage stopped and started its way along the streets toward the workshop of Madame Duprey.

After a tedious hour, the carriage finally stopped, and she followed her stepmother inside. All around were bolts of cloth, some shimmering in the daylight filtering in. Color and texture assaulted her, and her mind spun with the different possibilities. Katherine however, stood for a moment only before an assistant came out. Before Eleanor knew it, the young woman was holding fabrics up to her face and setting some aside.

When they had finished, five bolts lay in a haphazard pile and Katherine looked at Madame Duprey who had emerged from the back of her shop. "When do you think they will be done? The wedding is within the month."

"It should take no more than three weeks."

"Good, I shall expect them in three weeks. Good day." She swept out and Eleanor was left to follow once more. Eleanor sighed to herself, for the fabrics had been beautiful, if only the dresses that Katherine had chosen for her had been less revealing.

The next day dawned dismal and gray, leaving Eleanor with a headache. She ate very little of the breakfast Abby brought her, but drank her tea and leaned back against the pillows.

"Let me bring you some lavender, miss."

"No, Abby, I am well. I will get up now." She chose one of the less objectionable gowns and Abby was pleased to find that she could just draw Eleanor's hair back in a little fluff of curling locks with a few pulled out around her face. Abby wound a ribbon around the base of the "bun" and tied it off nicely.

"At last I look almost like any other girl. But oh! It is tight."

"No, miss. You look different. I can't say why, but you do."

Eleanor's fine eyebrows pursed her forehead and she stood, slipping into her shoes before heading out to sit in the parlor, hoping for a visit. She reached down and pulled up on the bodice of her dress to try and cover her breasts more since she was prevented from wearing a chemise with it.

The front door rang and Eleanor looked up expectantly, only to be disappointed as a friend of her father's entered.

Eleanor curtseyed and the butler went to call her father. Gesturing toward

the parlor, the old sea captain followed her and sat down on the larger of the settees. “You can’t be little Eleanor!”

Katherine’s voice sounded from the entrance. “Indeed it is. All ready to be married.”

“Married!? To whom?”

“Lord Montmarcy of Coventry.”

“Oh…er…quite nice. Yes.”

Eleanor felt his reaction matched hers. He had evidently heard of Lord Montmarcy. He looked at Katherine and frowned saying, “I don’t believe we have met…I’ve been in the Indies for some time.”

“I am Mrs. Warburton.”

“But…no! I heard she had died…”

“Yes, the former Mrs. Warburton is dead and buried. I am the current Mrs. Warburton.”

The old gentleman’s furred eyebrows shot up and he stammered, “I…but no…Warburton!” He added as Eleanor’s father approached. “What the devil is going on here?”

“I don’t know what you are referring to…”

“He is referring to me,” said Katherine.

“Ah. My first wife died some months ago, and since then I have married Katherine—an old friend, who had been a great comfort.”

“I see…er, yes. But, I mean, rather quick and all…”

“Admiral Traynor, is there a problem?”

“Er, no. Of course not.” The old man stood adding, “If you’ll excuse me, must be going.” The butler showed him out and her father watched the door close with a peculiar expression on his face. Katherine went to him and took his arm, but he brushed her off and walked away, leaving Katherine to watch him through veiled eyes.

Eleanor was hoping desperately that Katherine would leave, but she lingered so long that Eleanor began to hope that Lady Maberly would delay her visit. However, the bell rang and Eleanor prepared herself as Katherine looked ready to welcome her friend.

Lady Maberly entered and seemed a little distant to Eleanor. Her smile did not reach her eyes, and she did not maintain eye contact with Eleanor. Katherine motioned them all into the parlor to sit and ordered tea. Then, she turned to the other two saying,

“No doubt you saw the announcement in the paper. Our Eleanor is engaged.”

Eleanor blanched, how to tell her the truth? Lady Maberly tried to smile and failed saying, “Yes, my husband notified me this morning. I must say I was surprised.” She looked full at Eleanor, a note of accusation in her expression.

Unable to say anything in front of Katherine, Eleanor shrugged one shoulder and glanced at her stepmother who was smiling.

“Indeed, we are so happy for her. Lord Montmarcy is an excellent man and she will be well settled.”

Eleanor saw Lady Maberly’s glance shoot to her low bodice and instantly her hand came up to cover it. Her friend looked away and sipped her tea, saying,

“My brother, who you may remember, is expected this week.”

“Indeed. Please give him my greetings. I hope I shall be able to meet him.”

“He will probably be much engaged.” Lady Maberly shot a sorrowful look at Eleanor who tried to communicate the truth with her eyes. A few moments more and Lady Maberly rose to take her leave.

“I will give your salutations to my brother when he arrives. Good day, Miss Warburton, Mrs. Warburton.” And then she was gone.

Eleanor felt tears press against the back of her eyes and turned away from the door. She had hoped for a few moments of privacy with her friend to relay the truth. Now she did not know what she could do. Unless….

“If you will excuse me,” she said to Katherine. She tried not to hurry as she went up the stairs so as not to garner any attention from her stepmother. When she reached her room, she quickly wrote a note to her friend explaining all. When Abby came in much later to help her dress for dinner, Eleanor gave her the letter saying,

“You must post this next time you are out of the house.”

“That won’t be until my day out which is Thursday afternoon.” It was now Tuesday. Though she hated the thought of Lady Maberly believing she was marrying Lord Montmarcy, she had no choice but to accede. Somehow, she hoped it would not be too late.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The *Tempest* sailed into London's port two days ahead of schedule. Desmond went through the motions of getting her docked and ready for unloading. Finally, Blake shoved him on the shoulder and said,

"Get to it. Go find her."

Desmond grinned and went to hail a cab.

He all but burst forth from the cab as soon as it pulled up to Little Point. Walking swiftly up the way he anxiously hoped for some note or, even better, to find Eleanor there visiting as soon as he entered. Ringing the doorbell he all but shifted from foot to foot in anticipation.

The look on Rebecca's face stopped him in his tracks.

"What—what is it? Is Eleanor hurt…"

"She is fine. But, brother…she is engaged!"

"What? To whom? I'll…"

"Lord Montmarcy."

Silence fell. Desmond's expression faltered and Rebecca reached out to draw him into the parlor. He sat, but was up in a moment pacing around.

"Are you telling me they won? She would not be so inconstant!"

"She did not deny it when I saw her, though her beastly stepmother never left us alone."

Desmond shook his head. "There is something up, depend upon it! She would not have him."

"He is rich, Desmond, and after so many weeks at his estate…"

He shook his head, but doubt had crept into his eyes. "I will hold fast to her until the moment she is his by law!" But he sat finally, and stared out the window mutely. Rebecca reached over and took his hand and he gripped it tight, like a lifeline.

Standing, he turned away and said, "I need to return to the ship. Goodbye, sister."

"Won't you stay and take dinner?"

"Not tonight," he said, his voice harsh. The he turned at her and said more softly, "Not tonight." Without another word he stepped down the stairs and headed off toward the port, not even bothering to call a cab.

He walked swiftly, feet pounding the pavement with the intensity of his

emotions. Mind racing, he considered all he had heard and knew only one thing—he needed to get away from London.

By the time he reached *Tempest*, the unloading had finished and the last of the wine was being hauled away. Blake met him on board as he walked up the gangplank.

"Sir, a Mr. Ambrose Fortier was here wanting to know if we ship to Spain. I told him we do and he asked us to take five horses there with their grooms."

"Horses!"

"Yes, and quickly. His other ship fell out and he needs them there before the end of the month."

"We'd have to leave tomorrow…at the latest. Where is this fellow?"

"He was going to the harbor master, do you want me to find him?"

Desmond thought for a moment, as much as he hated shipping live animals, it would get him away from London quickly. He nodded and Blake set off.

Fortier was found and the deal struck. He promised to have the horses at the dock with grooms, hay, and feed for the journey by the next morning. Desmond nodded and watched him go, his chest tight. All the excitement of arriving in London had turned to septic disappointment and he felt broken. Desperately trying to put the pieces back together, he knew only that the following day couldn't come fast enough. That somehow, he needed to get away from everything that reminded him of Eleanor.

The trouble was, his very ship reminded him of her.

Moving slowly, he went to his quarters and sat heavily down on the chair by the windows. They looked out over the river and the other ships moving up and down. Normally he would never have agreed to go unless his ship was full, but this time he needed to go and would simply dip into savings to pay the crew. He stared through wavery glass at the water below, seeing only a future bereft of comfort and joy.

The horses showed up bright and early the next day, with a cartload of straw and another of hay. It took the crew some time to get everything loaded and the horses settled. Then the gangplank was raised and preparations for sailing began.

The crew was a little angry at their shortened holiday, but Blake kept them in line and the discontented mutterings were kept to a minimum. The yardarms were turned, the main sails loosed, and the ship edged away from the dock as her lines were let go and drawn up to be secured on deck. The wind swelled the sails and the ship picked up speed.

As they pulled away, Desmond caught sight of movement on the dock and swung around to peer intently. A carriage had pulled up and a woman had gotten out, waving something, but they were too far away by now to see clearly.

He pulled out his spyglass and looked through it, able to make out that it

was Rebecca's carriage, and it was she waving something like a piece of paper in her hand. The ship was too far underway to shift so he called out for the topsails to be opened and the ship's speed picked up, leaving Rebecca far behind.

They came to the mouth of the river and entered the open sea. Desmond felt a nagging pull to know why Rebecca would take the carriage down to the dock. He had sent her a note about their early departure—surely she had not come all that way simply to say goodbye…

He pushed it from his mind. There was nothing he could do about it now, they were en route to A Coruña in Spain and would not return for almost three weeks. There was no news that would be welcome to him right now, save that Eleanor had realized her mistake and broken off the engagement.

He could not allow himself to hope.

He shouted the heading out and Blake relayed it to the helmsmen. After a moment, the ship turned starboard. He moved to the front of the fo'c'sle and looked out over the bow, watching the jib sails buffet lightly. The ship pushed through the water at a fair clip, and the sense of exhilaration he usually felt when embarking nearly overwhelmed the anger and grief he felt.

Nearly, but not quite.

His eyes closed and he remembered Eleanor on the ship, in her green dress, sitting in a corner watching the sailors, or up on the fo'c'sle laughing at the dolphins. She had felt at home, and he had felt almost whole.

Darkness seemed to grind in his chest, pulling at him painfully. He had lost her…and the words seemed to echo in the emptiness he felt. Worse, the man who had won her did not deserve her and he wondered that she could be so persuaded as to consent to this marriage. Had she truly done so for money's sake?

He could not believe it. The Eleanor he had come to know would not have done so. But she had been imprisoned in Coventry for a long time… perhaps she'd had no choice but to give in. He wondered if she could still be persuaded.

It was too late—they were under sail and on their way to Spain. But he promised himself one last interview with Eleanor before she married. He would take one last chance to win her back.

Blake cleared his throat conspicuously behind him and he turned. "Yes?"

"Got a problem with one of the crew, captain."

"What is it?"

"He's been caught stealing."

"Who?"

"Bennet. Stole Henderson's savings from his kit."

"Damn and blast." He spun on his heel and made his way down to the main deck where several men were clustered in a ring around Bennet. The captive turned his eyes upon Desmond and blurted,

"It warn't me, cap'n."

"The money was found in his bedroll," said Blake.

"I didn't put it there!"

"I saw you!" Cook stumped forward. "Thought no one was watchin' and din't see me come around."

Desmond scowled at the man and said, "Keep him in leg irons until we get to Spain. We'll put him off there."

"But cap'n."

Desmond spun, finger but an inch from Bennet's nose "Don't speak to me. I won't tolerate thieves on board my ship. You've been caught fair, and you'll get off my ship in Spain. It's up to you to find your way back to England."

Blake had the leg irons brought out onto the deck and Bennet's ankles were clamped into place. He was anchored to the foremast and left as the rest of the crew returned to their stations. Desmond called for the yardarms to be turned to catch the shifting wind and the deck burst into activity. When the sails were set and the ropes coiled and secured, Desmond returned to the fo'c'sle to brood once more.

Days passed quietly with fair weather and mostly calm seas. On the third day, however, They noted smoke in the distance. Desmond watched it through his spyglass, trying to determine the source as Blake stood at his shoulder.

"What is it?"

"The only thing it could be—a ship on fire."

"We going to aid?"

"Of course. Trim sails and turn starboard."

Blake turned and shouted, "Trim sails, helm starboard." Sailors jumped into motion pulling on ropes and slowly the yardarms twisted slightly and were secured. The ship turned toward the smoke on the horizon.

Soon they began to encounter debris on the ocean. Barrels and planks, bits of sail, all floating in the water. Then they saw their first body, or part of one, speared by a large shard of wood. The crew was silent before these ominous signs.

The smoke column had drifted off and they found nothing left but debris floating on the peaking waves. Then, echoing across the water, came a voice,

"Ahoy, there! Ahoy!"

Desmond swung the spyglass around and scanned the water as the voice continued to shout. Blake ordered the crew to turn them toward the sound as Desmond continued to search.

"I've got him," and he pointed to port. Blake relayed the heading and the ship turned toward the origin of the calls.

As they neared, a rope was readied to throw. The man clung to a board in the water, his officer's uniform barely recognizable beneath the black smears of soot. The rope was thrown as the sails were lowered to stop the ship. Once the man had secured the rope, the sailors began to haul him in. The rope ladder was thrown over and the naval man gripped it and began to pull

himself up to the deck. When he reached the top, he collapsed over the side of the ship onto the deck.

Desmond knelt beside him. “Are there any more?”

The man shook his head. “Just me, lucky bastard that I am.” His brown hair was slicked down by seawater and his expressive brown eyes were reddened. He had a finely chiseled chin and for the moment was pale from his experience.

Blake called for the sails to be set once more and the ship moved forward. Desmond helped the man up. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Hannigan. James Hannigan. Lieutenant of the *H.M.S. Dorchester*.”

“What happened here?”

“Damn French four-rigger found us and outgunned us. One of the blasts hit our powder and the ship went up. I woke up sprawled on some decking. There were a few calls at first, but they went down. As I would have done, if not for you.”

“How long have you been in the water?”

“A few hours, not more. Watched the ship go down…horrible.”

“Well, we can take you to Spain, unless we see a navy ship between here and there.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll stay with you until you find one.”

“Of course. Let’s get you into dry clothes. Blake! Show Lt. Hannigan to one of the guest quarters and get him something to change into.”

“Cap’n, you’re more of a size for him, you sure you don’t want to get him something?”

Desmond looked at the height difference between Blake and Hannigan and nodded. He motioned the lieutenant to follow him and made his way down one deck. He pushed open one of the doors then trotted off to his own quarters to find a shirt, pants, and socks. When he returned, Hannigan thanked him, and another crew member passed forward a strip of toweling to dry off with.

Half an hour later, Lt. Hannigan appeared on deck in a shirt somewhat too large for him. He looked grimly down at himself and said, “I feel like a pirate out of uniform on ship.”

Desmond smiled. “Your uniform will be dry tomorrow. We’ll be pulling into port in a couple of days. Plenty of time to get ready.”

“I need to inform my superiors what happened.”

“Where were you bound?”

“We were on our way back to Portsmouth.”

“You’ll have to go long way round to get home I’m afraid.”

“I’m alive, and thankful no end to you.”

After a time, he returned to his quarters to rest, and Desmond checked their heading with the sextant and his maps. After correcting their direction, he went over the ship, checking everything and ordering a rope coiled tighter, a yardarm turned slightly. By the time he made it back to the fo’c’sle, dinner

had been called.

He called for Hannigan to be brought to his quarters to take the meal with him. Blake stood on deck, keeping watch. The lieutenant looked quizzically at the tray that was brought for them, noting the two plates and the single tureen.

"What have we tonight?"

"I think…yes, it's a fish stew. Cook seems partial to them—especially when we can catch a few on the fly."

Lt. Hannigan looked at him in disbelief. "You are going to eat that? Doesn't your cook prepare something different for you?"

"That would be a lot of work for him. If it's good enough for my crew, it's good enough for me. You, of course, don't have to eat it."

"No, no. I'm hungry enough to eat almost anything." He took a bite and his eyebrows raised slightly. "Not bad, but…" he pulled a bone from his mouth and set it carefully on the side of the plate.

Whatever his reservations, he ate well, and Desmond was glad to see it. "Doesn't your first mate eat with you?"

"We like to keep one of us above decks."

"I see. Just the two of you?"

"Got a man who stays up and watches while we sleep—third in charge if you will. Llewelyn Jones."

"Welshman?"

"Yes."

"Well, I want to earn my keep while I'm aboard. What can I do—been on ship since I was twelve."

"You can help us keep watch for the French. That four-rigger is out there somewhere."

"Surely I can do more than that?"

"We'll see. It will set my mind at ease knowing another pair of eyes is on the horizon."

"Then I'm your man."

Lt. Hannigan went to bed early, and Desmond went out to check on the ship and to send Blake to his dinner. Clouds obscured the moon from time to time and caused the stars to wink on and off. He stood on the fo'c'sle, the highest point on deck, and stared up at the sky wondering if Eleanor were watching the same stars as he.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Days had passed since Abby had posted her letter. In it, Eleanor had explained that in order to return to London and some hope of seeing Desmond, she'd had to agree to the engagement though she had no plan to go through with it. She had not heard from Lady Maberly yet, and could not settle to a task as she waited for some response from her friend.

And some news of Desmond.

Her father had gone to Portsmouth for some gathering of naval compatriots and Katherine spent most days out, Eleanor knew not where. Finally one morning, the bell rang and there stood Lady Maberly in the great hall.

Eleanor greeted her with a kiss and quickly pulled her to the back and out into the garden for a turn. She said nothing more than the barest greeting until they were well away from the house. Then she turned to Lady Maberly and said in a hushed voice,

"And did you receive my letter?"

"Yes, and now all is clear. But Miss Warburton, Desmond does not know!"

"What?!"

"He must have taken a commission after hearing of your supposed engagement, for as soon as I got your letter, I took the carriage to the docks and arrived in time to see his ship pulling to the middle of the river."

"No!"

Lady Maberly nodded as Eleanor clutched at her hand. "Oh, what he must think of me."

"He loves you still, of that I am certain."

"But I am not."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I am trapped for now. I had hoped to find a way to confer with Des…Captain Coulter. But now…"

"He will return…I know it."

"Yes, but when? I had hoped he would somehow take me away from all this."

"He will…"

"But what if he doesn't wish to? What if he finds he does not care for me anymore…"

"Never…he will never stop loving you."

Eleanor was not so sure. He had been told that the girl he cared for had engaged herself to another. What man would stay constant after that? No man she had known in her life.

She sat back against the broad tree trunk in the center of the circular bench and sighed. "Oh, Lady Maberly, I don't know how I can stand this much longer."

"Hush, Eleanor—may I call you that?"

"Oh, please do."

"Then you must call me Rebecca."

"No, I couldn't possibly…"

"I insist. When is the wedding date?"

"In one month. I must find a way to break this off, but I don't know what they will do to me."

"They can't actually touch you, surely!"

"My father would—and who would stop him?"

"Desmond would!"

"But he is gone."

They were both silent for a moment. Then Eleanor sighed and turned to Rebecca. "In all this I have forgotten to ask you how you are? How is the baby?"

Rebecca rubbed her growing stomach and smiled. "All is well so far. The doctor says four more months."

"Oh, and are you excited?"

"Worried that something may go wrong…"

"Do not speak it! We will assert only wondrous things. Your baby will arrive safely, and Desmond will come home in time."

Rebecca smiled and hugged her. "Yes, we will assert those things every day. We must and will be sisters!"

Eleanor felt her spirits lift just a little and managed to smile back. Rebecca's visit was short, owing to other commitments, but she promised to visit again soon and invited Eleanor to call as well. They walked back to the house to find Katherine at home and on her way to meet them.

"Ah, Lady Maberly. How lovely of you to visit."

"Thank you, Mrs. Warburton. I wish I had more time to visit with you."

"Oh, I understand. Eleanor, did you show her the fabric samples for your wedding dress?"

"I didn't know where they were. It was so fine out, we sat outside."

"Ah, well, perhaps next time."

"Yes," said Rebecca. "That would be lovely."

Katherine waited until Rebecca's carriage had pulled away before turning to Eleanor. "Some of your trousseau has arrived. Come see."

Eleanor followed her to her father's room and stood nervously as Katherine slowly unpackaged the gowns and held them up. They were beautiful, though cut lower in the bodice than Eleanor was comfortable with. But the colors! Beautiful jewel-like tones that would grace ballrooms lit by candlelight. She swallowed as she looked at them, wondering if she would ever wear them.

"They are so beautiful."

"You must be dressed as a true lady once you are married."

"Oh, of course."

"Lord Montmarcy is planning to come for a visit in two weeks."

Eleanor struggled to look delighted and said, "Oh, lovely!"

Katherine seemed to try to peer past her bright expression, then sat back a little and smiled. "Yes, it is. He will stay in London until the wedding when you will leave for your honeymoon."

"I wonder where that is to be…?"

"I believe he is keeping it a secret to surprise you with."

Eleanor tried to look suitably intrigued and excited. "That sounds like him."

Katherine rose from the chaise and shooed her from the room. "I will have the gowns packed for you to take with you on your honeymoon. The rest of your trousseau will be coming in the next week or so."

"Wonderful. Thank you."

Katherine smiled her cat-like smile and shut the door leaving Eleanor standing in the hallway. She headed down to her own room and collapsed on the bed, face first. She wondered at how people could lie and be duplicitous… it seemed like such heavy work for one's heart and mind.

Abby came in to dress her for dinner and Eleanor chose the wine-colored gown with the white tulle bodice. It was her least favorite, but she knew Katherine especially liked it and thought it would underscore her attitude towards Lord Montmarcy's coming.

She was surprised to find Wendell sitting in one of the chairs that evening. She curtseyed a greeting to him and sat down, watchful. Katherine was careful, but Eleanor detected subtle inclinations of her body towards her lover, and sly glances cast back and forth.

Disgusted, she simply focused on her plate and the roasted guinea fowl. The meat seemed a little tough to Eleanor, but she ate it anyway. Katherine, however, pushed her plate aside and called for the cook.

"What is this?" she demanded.

"Guinea fowl, madam," she said.

"It tastes like India rubber."

The cook's face reddened. She took off her apron and tossed it at Katherine's feet. "Ah've 'ad enough of this den o' vipers. Ah'm packin' me things an' goin'."

Katherine dusted her hands in front of the angry cook and turned away.

The cook spun her formidable bulk and marched from the dining room. Eleanor forked another bite into her mouth and chewed slowly. She didn't know when they would have another professionally cooked meal. There would only be old Mary's cooking, and she was half-blind now. News of her father's infamous behavior had spread, and it was getting difficult to find good servants who would be willing to work in their house.

Wendell simply laughed and said, "Well-handled. Never let them get the best of you."

Eleanor glanced up at him, realizing she'd never seen him with a valet, and asked, "Have you many servants?"

He looked somewhat embarrassed and said as he poked his fork into the guinea fowl, "Er…not so you'd notice, no."

Eleanor nodded once and took another bite. Katherine's fine fingers were drumming the table and she sighed forcefully and said, "Frances will be angry."

"You can get another cook."

"Yes, but it is getting very difficult to find them…"

"Just advertise, they'll come running."

"I shall have to raise the salary, and Frances won't like that."

"Well," Wendell reached over and covered her hand with his. "He'll trust your judgement." Katherine smiled a little, but Eleanor could see she was still worried.

She finished her dinner and excused herself, climbing the stairs to her room as quickly as possible so she could get out of the hated dress. Abby met her there and together they whisked her out of the gown and into her nightdress. Eleanor tied her linen wrap around her and sent Abby off to her room.

The curtains were drawn and reflected the firelight and the light from the single candle. Eleanor sat in bed, staring at the coverlet and desperate to escape somehow. Her plan was simple—leave the house and make her way to the docks where the *Tempest* lay. But that required Desmond to be in London.

She could only hope he would hurry.

Lying back, she stared up at the bed's canopy and noted a cobweb in the corner. She would have to tell the housekeeper, whoever that was now. Katherine was finding it difficult to keep servants, as the evening had demonstrated.

She must have fallen asleep, for the next she knew the curtain rings were rattling and the room was filled with light. She sat up, pushing her hair from her face and blinking in the sunshine. The leaves from the trees had been falling and now more light filtered in and made a pattern on the floor.

She swung her legs from under the covers and sat up, pulling the tray towards her and lifting the teacup. After taking a sip, she sighed and set it down. Abby's red curls showed from under her cap as she tidied the room. Eleanor noted again how similar they were in coloring and build and thought

it strange that they had each been born in such different lives.

"Do you have a sweetheart, Abby?"

Abby's head popped up and she smiled sheepishly. "Bert, the footman is nice. I think he is courting me, though I'm not sure. 'E's shy."

Eleanor smiled. "What is he like?"

"Oh, nothing like your captain or Lord Montmarcy. But he is kind to the horses and brought me a flower one day."

"He sounds very nice. I'm glad you've found someone."

Abby opened the wardrobe and looked at Eleanor over her shoulder. "What do you feel like today?"

Sighing, Eleanor cocked her head to one side and said, "Just the white one this morning. I may try to call on Lady Maberly."

"When is the admiral due back?"

Eleanor thought. "Today or tomorrow, I believe."

"I hope we have a new cook by then."

"Yes, indeed."

Eleanor sat as they tried to tame her waving locks into submission. Abby was able to twist it into a small bun and wrap a ribbon around it once again. Eleanor stood and blew out a breath as she twisted a curl into place.

"That will have to do. Thank you, Abby."

She peered out to see if anyone was around, then stepped through the doorway and headed for the library. To get there she needed to go down the stairs and turn down the south hall to the small room. The admiral had bought the house with a library intact, and had added a few books from his travels. Eleanor's books graced a low shelf in a corner, and she knelt there to find one of Mrs. Radcliffe's novels.

Taking it out, she dusted it lightly with her hand and went to a chaise set beside the single window and curled up to reread *The Romance of the Forest* for the third time. In the distance she thought she heard the bell ring, but ignored it.

Suddenly a scurrying out in the hallway caused her to look up in time to see a servant peek into the library and heave a sigh of relief.

"Oh, miss. The admiral is home and asking for you."

Eleanor closed her book and stood to follow the maid out into the main hall where her father stood. Katherine was there, looking a bit disheveled but hanging on his arm with a suitably adoring look. Eleanor paused and looked at her father.

"There you are—hiding again?"

"No, sir. Just reading in the library."

"Yes, well I am taking us out to my club for dinner tonight. Two of my friends will be there and I want to introduce you both."

"But, father, are you not tired from the trip?"

"I was in London last night, I just stayed at my club. I am perfectly well."

"I am glad to see it—though you were a naughty boy not to come home," said Katherine.

He looked down at his wife with an enigmatic expression. "I did not wish to disturb the household so late. I am here now."

"I will go change, then." Eleanor said and turned to go up the stairs when her father's voice caused her to pause.

"Wear something especially nice, Eleanor. I want to show off my daughter."

"Yes, father."

Katherine said, "Wear one of the trousseau gowns. I will pick one out and have your maid ready it for you."

"Thank you," Eleanor said trying to sound sincere. She went in search of Abby as a source of escape from them and finally found her in the kitchen talking with Mary, the defacto cook. She broke off as Eleanor appeared and looked a little self-conscious.

"Abby, I need you to go to Mrs. Warburton. She will give you a dress I need you to make ready for this evening."

"Yes, miss. I was just talking with Mrs Mattingly about supper."

"Well, my father and stepmother won't be here."

Mrs. Mattingly looked relieved and rolled the dough before her a little less forcefully. Eleanor sighed and turned to leave. She glanced down and realized she still carried the book and decided to take it upstairs to her room.

The afternoon was spent getting ready and then waiting for the carriage to come round to pick them up. Katherine seemed somewhat disgruntled while her father appeared rather stern which made Eleanor wonder if they'd had a disagreement. The carriage was announced, and her father rose without looking at either of them and preceded them out.

Eleanor climbed in and sat in the backward-facing seat. She smoothed the fine silk of her skirt, admiring once again the deep, sapphire color that seemed to move in the lamplight. She caught her father's gaze upon her and looked enquiringly at him.

"Yes, father?"

"You look quite fine this evening."

"Thank you, father."

"I think you will grace Lord Montmarcy's arm quite nicely."

"I do hope so," she said a little falteringly, glad when his attention was diverted.

They arrived at the admiral's club and went up the broad steps into the fine old building. They were announced and settled at a table where two other gentlemen rose and bowed. Both of them seemed to be the admiral's age.

"Katherine, Eleanor, may I present Vice Admiral Dauntley, and Rear Admiral Becton."

Eleanor curtseyed, and Katherine extended her hand. Eleanor was diverted to see that Admiral Becton ignored her hand and stood stiffly at

attention while Vice Admiral Dauntley merely touched her fingers and inclined his head. Katherine withdrew her hand, her expression steely.

They were seated and food brought out—a rather fine vichyssoise followed by lamb roast with tiny potatoes. Eleanor ate very little, finding the discussion to be a monotonous digression of who knew who and where was so-and-so?

Katherine interjected from time to time, only to be silenced by a frown from her husband and the stony expressions of the other gentlemen. Finally, she sat back and simply observed them all with a strange expression that disquieted Eleanor. They progressed through the meal until it was time for the men to take their port. Eleanor and Katherine were shown to a small parlor.

The hours tolled by as the women sat forgotten in another room while the men drank their port. The room hosted rather tattered chairs and dusty stuffed birds. Eleanor tried not to breath in the stale, gloomy air and Katherine refused to sit.

The admiral finally came for them and their carriage was called. Eleanor sat in her customary spot only to find Katherine sitting in the space next to her. The admiral got in and slowed when he saw Katherine who was looking out the window.

"Come sit by me, dearest."

"I'll stay here, thank you."

He frowned. "What is all this?"

She swung a deadly look upon him. "You left us sitting in that ghastly room."

"What would you have me do? Cut short my visit with my two friends?"

"Better that than leave your wife sitting alone in some nasty room."

"You had Eleanor with you…"

Katherine wiped Eleanor from existence with a swipe of her hand. "I am your wife, I should come first before some moldy cronies."

Too late, she realized she had gone too far as Admiral Warburton straightened and looked at her with a fiery expression.

"Is that what you think of me and my friends? You were nothing before I found you in that cabaret, and you can be nothing again."

Eleanor scrunched herself into the corner of the carriage as the two battled. Katherine all but spat in response,

"I had everything a man could want—and I gave it to them. You weren't my first and may not be my last!"

The admiral's hand shot out and he slapped Katherine so hard she fell against Eleanor. She righted herself and her hand came away from her cheek bloody where her earring had cut it. She shuddered a little as she looked at her hand, but she stayed silent and dropped her hand down onto her lap. Eleanor held out a handkerchief but was ignored, and placed it back into her reticule staring out the window as they completed their trip home.

Once there, Katherine waited in the carriage, urging Eleanor to go on

before her. Stepping down, she glanced back at her stepmother who was slowly exiting. She stood in place for a moment before following Eleanor who paused on the front steps.

Katherine shooed her on and Eleanor climbed the steps to the upper landing before looking back. Sweeping regally up the stairs, Katherine flowed away from Eleanor toward her room. Eleanor turned and went to her own room, where Abby met her.

"Well miss, 'ow was it?"

Eleanor sighed. "Unpleasant at its worst, tedious at its best."

"Oh, miss. Sounds awful."

Nodding, Eleanor let out a sigh as the corset came away. The chemise was peeled off and the nightdress replaced it. She sat while Abby undid her hair and brushed it out, the smooth strokes soothing to her shattered nerves.

"I don't thank you enough, Abby."

"I don't think you're s'posed to. Least I've never 'ad a master thank me before."

Eleanor smiled. "Well, I appreciate you. There, that is said whether right or wrong."

"I thank you, miss."

She was done and Eleanor climbed into bed as Abby picked up the clothing and tidied the room. Arms full, she blew out the candle leaving Eleanor alone with a single candle burning on the nightstand. She reached over and pinched it off, letting darkness envelop her. A sliver of moonlight escaped the curtains and lay in a thin stripe on the floor. Now and then branches from the tree outside obscured it, causing it to flicker and move like a living thing. Eleanor watched it until she fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The sun rode high as the *Tempest* pulled into harbor at A Coruña. The bright sunshine and mild temperatures dared Desmond to be downcast. He squinted up into the sky and blew out a breath. Darkness still shrouded his spirit—Eleanor was lost to him.

The horses whinnied as they tasted fresh air and stepped uncertainly on dry land. The new owner beamed as he saw them and thanked Desmond many times over. He pushed extra *réis* upon Desmond who nearly smiled then. When the man had left, he handed the coins over to Blake to distribute amongst the crew.

Lt. James Hannigan stood on the deck staring at the other ships that were moored around them. He lifted the spyglass Desmond had loaned him and waved it to him after a moment.

"There—the *H.M.S. Royale*. Please, come with me to help me explain."

Desmond looked to Blake who nodded that he had everything under control. He brushed off his trousers and waved James on ahead of him. They trotted down the gangplank onto the solid concrete of the dock and made their way through the milling shoppers and fishermen to the stately ship several berths down. As they neared, the familiar shape of a captain's hat rose over the deck, and they made their way toward it.

The captain was a dour, middle-aged man who peered out from under scraggy eyebrows to look both men up and down. "What's this then? Look at the state of your uniform, man! What kind of lieutenant are you?"

"Lieutenant James Hannigan of the *H.M.S. Dorchester*."

"Heard of it. Fine ship. Captain Darleigh. Where is it?"

"Gone, sir. Blown up by the French. I was the only survivor. Captain Coulter here fished me out of the sea."

"French! By God! Well, come on Lieutenant! We'll take ye back to England. Ye made it just in time, we're putting out." He turned to Desmond and offered his hand, "Thank ye, captain."

Desmond nodded and shook both men's hands before turning and leaving James behind. The gangplank was drawn up as he stepped off and he watched the ship begin to ease out of her slip. Raising one last hand to Lt. Hannigan who waved from the rail, he turned from the sight and made his

way along the dock. He wandered slowly among the crowd, catching sight of a crewman here and there from the *Tempest*. He thought he saw Bennet, the crew man who had been put out, but the man ducked behind a tub full of fish causing him to laugh.

He slowed as he came upon a side street with little shops peeking out. He found himself drawn to one that had shawls waving like pennants from the awning. Somehow, they reminded him of the shawl he had given Eleanor and he felt closer to her here. He came upon one with gold and green tracing a design upon a deep blue background. He reached in his pocket only to find a couple English coins. But, when he held them up, the shop keeper beamed and nodded. Soon, Desmond was leaving the shop with the shawl wrapped and in his arms.

It cheered him, though he didn't know why. Odds were he would never see her again, and yet for that reason alone he wanted to keep the shawl—something to forever remember her by.

He made his way back to the ship and into his quarters. Once there, he set the package into the trunk that had once housed the other shawl and the dress. His hand rested on the lid once he had closed it and he bowed his head for a moment.

Somehow, he needed to get control over his emotions. He needed to get over her, and he didn't know how.

Blake came in the open door and stood for a moment. "Sir?"

Desmond spun, placing both hands on the trunk and looking startled. "Yes, Blake."

"Hannigan get off all right?"

"Yes, got him on the *Royale*. Captain seems a decent sort. They put out just now."

"Excellent. Are you needing me, or can I go into the town?"

"No, go on, Blake. I'm not going anywhere. We can stay in port a couple days before heading out—that should please the crew."

"They'll enjoy the break. I'll see you then…"

Desmond watched him go and sighed. Most of the crew would be dispersed into the city and come back in dribs and drabs throughout the following day. Cook would stay onboard, but he kept to himself. For the first time in a long time, he felt lonely.

He allowed himself to envision a future with Eleanor. Going out into the city to find a cozy place to eat, wandering about the shops, arm-in-arm. Coming back to the ship and bed…he closed his eyes and sighed. He stood and walked out into the cool night air.

The city came alive with light and sound as the night progressed. Music floated on the breeze and Desmond sighed wondering what Eleanor would make of it all. As always, he drank in the notes of the city and savored its unique character. He only wished he had someone to share it all with.

The next day dawned cool and misty. He spent the day making small

repairs to the ship. Cook supervised delivery of food in the middle of the day and chastised his young assistant for staying out too long. Men came back, some of them red-eyed and weary from their exploits, falling straight into bed.

Desmond sat in his cabin as the day grew more dreary. He watched as the sky darkened and turned to rain. It pelted the windows in sheets cast by the wind and ran down the sides of the ship to the ocean below.

He heard the gangplank rattle as more men came back late in the day and throughout the night. Sleeping lightly, he started up repeatedly, heart thumping as though an attack was imminent. Each time, he had been dreaming of Eleanor, and waking to think someone was taking her.

Finally, he rose to pull on his clothing and stand at the window, watching the sun come up over the rooftops. The golden glow spread across the sky and glimmered on the leaden tops of the buildings. Thoughts of Eleanor pounded his brain, and he took a deep breath to try and steady himself.

It was no good, he needed to return to England.

Spinning on his heel he stormed out onto the deck in the quiet morning air. Shouting, he went down the stairs to the lower decks and roused the sleeping sailors. “Get up! We’re casting off!”

Groggy grumbles met his calls, but he climbed the narrow stairs to the top deck where he met Blake buttoning his waistcoat. “What is it, cap’n?”

“We’re setting sail. Today. For England. Get to your stations.”

Cook stumped out and called up. “Cap’n, what about breakfast?”

“Aye, the crew can eat. But then to their stations.”

Blake ran a hand across his face and his eyebrows raised. “All right, how soon do you want to get underway?”

“As soon as the crew is ready.”

“Jenkins isn’t back,” came a call from down below.

“Denman too, he’s not here.”

“Send men out to find them. I want us under sail as soon as possible.” Desmond stomped off toward the fo’c’sle, leaving men behind him scratching their heads.

It took an hour to find the missing crewmen, but the ship pulled away from her moorings by noon and all sails were set as she picked up speed back toward London. Desmond scanned the horizon for enemy ships, and they clipped along at almost ten knots per hour.

He stood near the bowsprit, the wind blowing over him as they went. The crew had grumbled a little while getting underway, but they were working now, occasionally breaking into song. He listened to them and was thankful yet again he had worked so hard to gather a good crew.

England was still days away, and he could not help but feel some urgency. Somehow, he must see her once more to hear from her own mouth that she had chosen someone else. He would not accept it until then.

Perhaps not even then…

Open ocean surrounded them now, Portugal had sunk beneath the

horizon. Dolphins leapt in the bow wave and raced along beside them. Desmond smiled at them, feeling a rush of exhilaration as they sped on their course back to Eleanor.

Suddenly, one of the men shouted and pointed to something off the starboard side. Desmond whipped out the spyglass and spun in place. He scanned, sighted and there it was. A French ship coming toward them.

"Clew up the mainsail! We're tacking 'round!" A flurry of activity followed, and he waited tensely before shouting, "Ready about." He watched as the ship began to rotate in place before adding, "Haul up the spanker!"

The crew had caught his urgency and were flying through their maneuvers in a seamless fashion. The headsails were slackened, and he shouted, "Aft let go." The bow swung to starboard and they were nearly around. He waited tensely before adding "Brace round forward."

Then, "Ease out the spanker! Set the mainsail!"

As the ship had stalled in its turn, the French ship had gained ground. Desmond could clearly see her flag in the spyglass. He found himself urging *Tempest* saying, "Come on, now."

The ship picked up speed, sitting higher in the water due to an empty hull, she skimmed faster through the waves than the cannon-laden ship chasing her. Desmond had run toward aft and climbed the poop deck to keep his spyglass trained on the ship in their wake.

A booming noise sounded, followed by a high-pitched whistle and an explosion of seawater just behind them. Desmond ducked from the spray and shouted, "They're just tired of chasing us, men. We're almost away." A shout from the crew answered him and he held his breath as *Tempest* began to outstrip the French ship.

Another boom sounded and this time the sea exploded on their port side, but some distance behind. The crew shouted again, and Desmond felt like they were flying. Blake came up to him and after a few tense minutes watching the French ship begin to fall away, he said, "Where are we headed?"

"Away from that ship for now. We'll figure out a heading later."

"How many days have we lost on this?"

"Two, I'd bet. Maybe more. By the time we correct and reach the point where we were…probably three days. We'll see. We're stocked for it."

"Yes, but you wanted to get back to England quickly."

"I also want to keep my ship out of the hands of the French. We'll stay on this course for a while."

The day waned, and by nightfall the French ship had dropped below the horizon. Desmond kept them going, however, and only turned them later in the night. He stayed up scanning the sea for more ships, but only saw a single merchant ship like them sailing through the darkness.

Desmond used the sextant to gauge their position and then mapped out their course for England. He gave the new heading to the helmsmen and positioned himself on the fo'c'sle to watch the sun come up.

The distant line of gold spread out and toward him as the glowing orb rose over the horizon. The sky lightened into a shade of green that reminded him suddenly of Eleanor's eyes. Then the color was gone, overtaken by pink and blue. He hoped it was not a sign.

The day sped by as they slowly made up time lost in outrunning the French. Desmond had plotted them a course to the southwest before going north to come up underneath England. Then they would skirt the coast until they reached London.

Blake came up and dropped a hand on his shoulder. "I can handle it, sir. Get some rest."

Desmond nodded, loathe as he was to hand the command over, he knew he needed to rest. The adrenaline of the chase had long faded and left him yawning from time to time. He made his way to his quarters and climbed into his bed, still dressed, though he did kick off his boots. Intending to lay there for just a few minutes, his eyes closed, and he fell asleep.

He started awake much later to find his cabin in darkness. A single candle burned, set there he was sure by Cook's boy. He rose and padded over to pick it up and hold it in front of him. He pulled his watch out to check the time and blew out a frustrated breath. He'd slept nearly half the night away. Grumbling to himself, he pulled on his boots and stepped from his cabin.

Rain hit him, and he ducked back inside to don his oilskins before facing it. Once out on the deck, he checked with the helmsmen before heading toward the bow. Climbing the steps to the fo'c'sle, he peered out across the water, driven to assure himself there were no ships in view.

Clouds obscured the moon which cast a gray pearlescent light across the sky. Stars peeked between the swathes of gray but winked out almost as quickly as they appeared. His breath appeared in a slight puff of white before him and he shivered beneath his oilskins.

Footsteps sounded behind him and he turned in place to see Blake coming up behind him.

"Ah, so you're awake!"

"You too!"

"I just went below for a snack. Found meself a bit peckish."

Desmond laughed. "I think I am too. Since I missed dinner."

"I hear you were snoring loud enough to wake the kraken."

"Nonsense!" but he laughed again. Nodding, he headed for the stairs that led below and presented himself in the galley where he found the cook's boy stirring a small pot on a side burner of the stove.

"What's in there," Desmond asked.

"Leftover soup. Gone thick."

"Dish me up some. Then you need to get to bed I should think."

The boy yawned. "Aye. Ah'm that tired." He dished up a bowl of the soup which had gone very thick and handed it to Desmond. Yawning again, he replaced the lid on the pot and disappeared into the shadows, presumably

to his bed. Desmond crouched on a small stool and ate the pea soup. It was warm and nourishing, and he ate every scrap before washing his bowl out and setting it on the stack.

When he returned to the deck, Blake waved as he passed by on his way to his own quarters below the captain's. Desmond watched him go, then pulled out his spyglass to scan the darkness for any sign of lights that would indicate a ship nearby.

Seeing nothing, he lowered the glass and leaned against the rail. He could feel the ship's vibrations, sense her power and strength, and it filled him with hope. Hope that they would get to England in time, and that he would have his moment with Eleanor.

And that it might not be too late.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Eleanor woke shivering. The weather had changed overnight and caught them unawares. Abby came in with a maid who was carrying a coal hod and quickly stoked the fire which soon took the frozen edge off the room.

"Thank you."

"Not at all, miss." The maid picked up the coal hod and hauled it out of the room. Abby opened the wardrobe saying,

"What will you wear today?"

"Mmmm. My green dress, I believe."

Abby smiled and Eleanor sat down to have her hair styled. It was nearly to her shoulders now, and went up into a roll quite nicely. Once her hair was done she dressed in shift, corset, and petticoat before the dress was lowered over her head.

"I may need my shawl with it today."

"Yes, miss," said Abby retrieving the shawl Desmond gave her and draping it over her shoulders.

"There, that will do. I'll go down to the parlor and read, I think." She picked up her book from the side table and went out into the hall.

Shouting echoed from down the hall and suddenly the door to her father's room exploded outward, swinging full around and slamming into the wall. Her father stalked out and thudded down the stairs. Katherine came out and flung a small vase in the direction he went. It hit the ground at the base of the staircase and shattered with an explosive sound.

Her father paused, then turned around and went back upstairs with deadly calm. Eleanor clutched her book to her breast as he passed her and went back into the room, pulling the door shut behind him. Eleanor was halfway down the stairs when she heard her father's voice raised in measured precision, then a long silence followed by the sound of crying.

Her father reappeared and sped down past her and out the front door.

Eleanor stood uncertainly for a moment, then walked slowly down the rest of the stairs and into the parlor where she sat at the piano, suddenly taken with the mood to try and remember one of her old lessons. She pulled some music toward her and quietly began trying to finger the keys.

"Quiet that racket!"

Eleanor looked up to see Katherine standing there and she quickly pulled her hands away from the keys and stood as well, pulling her shawl close around her. Katherine's tear-streaked face took in her appearance and then turned an unpleasant shade of red.

"What are you wearing?"

"Just my green gown."

"I told you I didn't want to see that thing again."

"I just thought, for a morning dress around the house."

"Never! I do not want to see you in that ugly, frumpy, horrid dress again." In emphasis, she scooped up the ink bottle from the writing desk and unstoppered it before flinging it in swipes at Eleanor. The ink flew out and streaked her dress and shawl, staining it in long black stripes which feathered and spread downwards.

Eleanor froze in astonishment and Katherine threw the ink bottle to shatter at Eleanor's feet, ink spattering up from below onto the dress. Then she spun on her heel and marched back to her room.

Blinking in horror, Eleanor stared down at her ruined dress. Suddenly footsteps sounded out in the hallway, and she looked up to see Abby standing there.

"Oh, miss…" She came slowly toward her, bending to pick up the shards of glass scattered about the floor. "Here, hold up the dress and go back to your room. I'll be up in a moment to help you."

Eleanor nodded and began to make her way from the parlor. Once in her room, she stood still, waiting for Abby to appear. When she did, they first carefully lifted the dress off and Abby rolled it up and set it by the door. She did not need to say it was ruined…Eleanor knew there was no hope of cleaning the ink from it. Her corset had some ink stains on it and so Abby dug out her older corset and exchanged it so that she could carry it off and clean the milder stains from it.

Eleanor sat now, staring at the pile near the door, tears in her eyes as Abby pulled her pale pink linen gown out and helped to lower it over her head. Once it was fastened, she gathered the gown and the shawl and paused in the doorway.

"I think I can get enough of the stains out of the shawl." She opened her mouth to say something else, then closed it and left instead.

Leaning her forehead onto one palm, Eleanor sat and cried at her dressing table. Tears fell onto her lap, spreading outward on the fabric and reminding her of ocean spray hitting her dress when she was aboard *Tempest*. That brought on another round of tears, and she searched out a handkerchief to dry her eyes and face with. Her hand fell upon Desmond's handkerchief, and she clutched it close.

Slowly, her sorrow drained away, leaving her empty of all emotion. She lifted her head and stared out the window, desperately wishing she could fly free.

After several minutes, she rose and collected her book. Moving quickly and silently down the stairs she made her way to the back garden and all but fled down the path to the central bench around the old oak tree despite the chill in the air. She sat on the bench and clutched her arms about her. For a moment she contemplated going back for a pelisse, but decided against it. She did not want to be in the house any longer.

"Oh Mama. It grows worse each day. Why did you leave me?" She whispered, shivering slightly. She sat bent over her book, not reading, simply staring at the ground between her slippers. Her fingers rubbed the pages up and down, and something about the rough texture was comforting.

A footfall sounded on the path, and she looked up, dabbing her eye with the back of her hand. Abby stood there with a letter in her hand, and her pelisse.

"This came for you, miss, and I thought you might need this."

Eleanor stood and pulled the pelisse around her gratefully. Then, she reached out and Abby placed it in her hand before turning and returning to the house. The handwriting was familiar, and yet not one she had seen in some time. She frowned as she realized it was from her friend Harriet.

My Dearest Eleanor,

I am writing this in secret, as my mother does not want me socializing any longer with you. We have heard such tales, and yet I have told my mother that what your parents do is nothing to do with you. Still, she won't hear it.

Did you really run away on board a ship full of pirates? That is what they are saying. I tell everyone I don't believe it, but they don't listen to me. The Eleanor I know would never associate with pirates.

But my dear, how sorry I was to hear about your mother. Such a kind lady—I still remember her pulling that thorn from my hand when I plucked that rose. She was gentleness itself. But mother insists that your father had her poisoned so he could introduce his mistress…oh my dear…I wasn't supposed to say that. But I wanted you to know what people are saying.

And now you are engaged to Lord Montmarcy. But do you know what they say about him? I cannot repeat all that I have heard, but Helen Weddleton said he is a terrible rake and has ruined ever so many girls. Oh my friend, do not let him ruin you!

I must go, I wish to slip this in the mail. Do not worry about writing me back—I do not know that I would be allowed to read it.

Much love,

Harriet Dagwood

Eleanor folded the letter up and placed it between the pages of her book. She would have cried if she'd had any tears left. The confirmation of what her family's status in society was hit her hard. Much as she had expected it, she had hoped somehow that it was not so.

Drops of water fell upon her dress and for a moment she thought she was

crying again. Then thunder broke and she rose to hurry indoors.

She made it inside just as another thunderclap shook the house and the skies opened up. She turned to look at the sheets of rain pouring past the small window beside the door. She carefully removed her bonnet and set it down on the narrow table to dry, then wended her way back to her room.

The fire in her room had warded off the chill and she sat in the low chair beside the fire waiting for her toes to warm. Abby came in after a few minutes, maneuvering a tray around the door and setting it on the little table.

"Brought you some tea to warm you. Cook added some fresh biscuits."

"Thank you, Abby." She reached like an automaton for the tea and picked up a biscuit which she did not taste. Abby bustled around the room for a moment before leaving her to herself.

Eleanor gave herself a shake. She rang the bell and when the maid arrived said, "Have the carriage called for me, please."

She quickly ate the biscuits and drank her tea before pulling her pelisse on again and tying on a dry bonnet over her hair. She buttoned the pelisse up and went downstairs to wait for the carriage. She kept a wary eye on the upstairs walkway in case Katherine made an appearance.

As soon as she saw the carriage round the corner, she stepped free of the house and moved quickly to where the open door waited. "Little Point," was all she said. She did not breathe a sigh of relief until she sat safe inside and it had begun to move off.

When they pulled up to the Maberlys' home, Eleanor stepped down and all but ran up the walkway, hoping that Rebecca was in and receiving guests. Her fingers twined in front of her as she waited until finally, she was shown into the parlor and asked to wait.

She did not wait long, Rebecca floated in and clasped her hands. "Oh wonderful surprise! And how are you?"

Eleanor's mouth opened, but too many things fought to come out and instead she said nothing. But her eyes smarted suddenly from the tears that threatened, and she quickly hunted for a handkerchief in her reticule.

Rebecca leaned toward her. "Oh my dear, what is it? What has happened?"

"I don't know what to say…my stepmother is a beast!"

Rebecca's eyebrows shot up and the dam burst on Eleanor's tears. She cried for several minutes with her friend simply rubbing her arm and patting her hands. When she finally stopped, she dragged in a ragged breath and said, "I'm so sorry—I don't know what came over me."

"Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Eleanor took a deep breath and did so, quietly and succinctly. Rebecca's face reddened as she listened to the destruction of the dress, and then the letter which simply capped it all.

"My dear, you are in a difficult situation. Your father's actions have separated you from the rest of the society you knew. You must let them go,

they will not come back. But you will attract true friends who will stay beside you through thick and thin. Like Sholto and I. And Desmond."

"I wish he was here. He makes me feel strong."

"And yet you ran away from your home before you knew him. You have strength within you if you will trust yourself."

Eleanor sighed. "Perhaps, I am just so tired just now. Tired of enduring."

A tea tray was brought in and set down on the low table. Rebecca reached for the teapot and poured Eleanor a cup. "Here, nice and strong and fortifying."

Smiling wanly, Eleanor took a sip and then another. She set the cup down and lifted her head. "You are right—I need to be strong in myself."

Rebecca smiled, and squeezed her hand. "Exactly. Now, what shall we do? I know! I shall bore you by making you visit the nursery to see the changes I have made in readiness for our little one."

Eleanor was taken up the stairs to a bright room with toys set upon shelves and a very low table with small chairs that charmed her. She could imagine being a child in that room, playing and learning and being happy. Before she knew it, an hour had passed and she started when the clock chimed saying,

"Oh—I have had the carriage too long. If Katherine needed it then she will be angry."

"Well I won't say I am sorry. I have enjoyed this far too much."

"As have I! But, I must go. Do take care and let me know when you hear from your brother."

"I will." Rebecca said as she hugged her. Eleanor flew down the walk to the carriage and sighed as it pulled out away from the happy home.

When they arrived home, she walked slowly up the path to the house, only to find the door flung open from within to reveal Katherine. She reached out and gripped Eleanor's arm with her claw-like hand and dragged her into the house, then flung her across the hall.

"What were you doing, taking the carriage out without permission? No thought as to whether I needed it?"

"I…I just didn't think…I'm sorry." Eleanor pulled herself up from where she had landed and rubbed her arm.

"You didn't think! Well, you shan't have to. You are forbidden to take the carriage out any more. I shall let all the servants and the footmen know. No more."

"But…"

"No more." Katherine swung on her heel and marched out to the carriage herself.

Eleanor glanced around at the uncomfortable servant who had witnessed the interlude. Lifting her chin a little, she headed up to her room where Abby met her.

"Are you hurt, miss?"

"No Abby, just shaken."

"Oh, miss, I could fill her ear…"

Eleanor reached out and stopped her with a hand. "Abby, no. You would lose your place and that would be the end of it. I don't know what I would do without you."

"There, miss. I'd do anything for you."

As the sunlight leaked into the room and lit on Abby's hair Eleanor's eyebrows met in thought. "I may need you to do something for me, Abby. Soon…" she broke off as the thoughts congealed in her brain and her frown transformed into a crafty smile.

Sounds echoed up the staircase and Eleanor listened, then bounded up to go out to the walkway and look down at the newcomer in the hall. Charles stood in the main hall and glanced up at her. Quick on his heels came her father who waved the butler aside and pointed at Charles,

"Unless you are here to accede to my demands, you are not welcome here."

"Can't a brother visit his sister?" He glanced beseechingly up at Eleanor who shook her head. He held out a hand to her and added, "Come here, sister."

She took no more than two steps before her father picked up a walking stick and swung it toward her brother. Charles ducked and then reached out to grasp it in both hands and wrenched it free. Then he held it up threateningly.

The admiral laughed. "Go ahead, swing it. See what happens."

"I should! I should kill you, you old monster!"

"Try it. You think I'm not ready for that? Any attempt by you would be clumsy and foolhardy. I'm not afraid of you. But I am cutting you off. Katherine is pregnant, and will soon bear me another child. I have no further need of you."

He jumped forward then and snatched the stick away from Charles, then swung it against his back, causing him to buckle over in an instant of startled astonishment. The admiral bent over his prone form and said, "Get out."

Eleanor watched as her brother was dragged to the front step and left, while the door was shut and locked on him. Her father met her eyes for a sinister moment before turning and going to his room.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sunlight peeked through the clouds in spots of silver as the *Tempest* entered the mouth of the river on its way to London's docks. Desmond stood on the fo'c'sle, calling back directions to the helmsman and the crew as they slowed and steered into a slip alongside the dock. When the ship had been tethered and secured, the gangplank lowered across, and Desmond stepped off leaving the ship in Willie Blake's capable hands.

He had to walk a little way to catch a hansom to take him to Little Point. Once there, he strode purposefully up the walk and rang the bell. He was announced and met first with Sholto, whose raised eyebrows and open expression indicated his surprise.

"Desmond! When did you return to England?"

"Almost this minute," he was interrupted by a cry…

"Is that my brother? Here? In London?" Rebecca appeared at the top of the stairs and gingerly made her way down, one hand on the rail and the other on the growing mound on her belly.

"Is that my sister? You've swelled!"

"That is impolite, Desmond. You are not supposed to comment upon a woman's figure."

"But Reb!"

Rebecca sighed. "I know! It kicks and moves so much, it keeps me awake at night."

"Which keeps me awake," said Sholto with a smile.

Rebecca batted at him with the back of her hand. Then she grinned gleefully and grasped her brother's hands in her own.

"Oh I am so glad you are here! Come, we have much to talk about!" She drew him into the parlor and sat carefully down.

"How is Eleanor?" In his haste to inquire, he forgot his manners and simply called her by her name.

"She needs help. Her father and stepmother are treating her horribly. She sent me a note that she was no longer allowed out in the carriage. She is trapped there, Desmond! Oh! And you do not know…she is not engaged—it was only a ruse to get them to release her from the horrible chateau in Coventry."

Warm sunlight poured into Desmond's soul. She was not engaged! She could be his…if he acted quickly.

"When is she supposed to get married?"

"Two or three weeks, no more."

"It appears I must storm the castle then."

"But if her father refuses…you cannot just carry her off."

"But I might get to see her, and by her actions I will know what mine should be."

"You intend to simply go up to her?"

Sholto called a servant and said, "Call the carriage."

Desmond cast a grateful look at his brother-in-law. "I intend to present myself at the house and demand an audience with her."

"If you are refused?"

"Then we battle. I will not leave until I have seen her."

When the carriage was called, he rose and kissed his sister on the cheek, shook hands with Sholto, and strode back down the walk to where the footman and driver waited. He turned and waved at his sister who watched from the top step and then sat down on the plush seat.

The journey to the admiral's home was relatively short. When he arrived, Desmond took a deep breath armed himself with the image of Eleanor, then he strode up the walk and rang the bell. When the butler answered, he said simply,

"I wish to see Miss Warburton."

He was ushered into the foyer while the butler disappeared down a side hall. When next he looked up, the admiral was striding toward him.

"Get the hell out of my house!"

Time seemed to stop for Desmond as he faced the admiral. "I am here to see Miss Warburton. Eleanor!" he raised his voice.

The admiral's face purpled and he shouted, "How dare you call her so! Get out!"

"Captain! Oh, it's you!" Eleanor called out from the walkway above and came running down the stairs. When she reached the ground, her father flung out a hand and thrust her back from them, causing her to fall upon the stair with a cry.

"Damn you!" Desmond sprang forward, only to stop as the muzzle of a holster pistol came up to stare him in the face.

"I believe I said get out of my house." The admiral cocked the pistol and Eleanor cried out,

"Desmond, go! He will do it! Go!"

With a glance at her, he said, "This is not over. Your lackeys could not stop me, and neither will you."

"Get out."

Desmond backed up, the pistol followed his every move. With a final glance at Eleanor, he turned and exited the house to hear the door slam shut

behind him. Hesitantly, hating to leave her to such brutish treatment, he slowly made his way down the walk to the waiting carriage.

It seemed like a very long trip back to Little Point. His mind buzzed as it went over the past few minutes minutely. He was still thinking when the carriage stopped outside his sister's house. He marched slowly and heavily up the walk to the house. Once there, Rebecca rushed up to him and immediately began quizzing him.

"What happened? Did you see Eleanor? How did she look?" Sholto came down the stairs and joined them.

Briefly, he told them all that had happened, and they were silent.

"Well, you know she cares for you."

"Yes. Somehow I need to get her away from there."

Rebecca thought for a moment. "Perhaps if I asked to take her out shopping."

"I don't think they will allow anyone remotely connected with me to be near her."

"No, I suppose you are right. But, Desmond, what can you do?"

He glanced at the clock and frowned even deeper. "I need to return to the ship. I will have a plan tomorrow." He kissed his sister and left in her carriage at her insistence.

The *Tempest* sat quietly in her berth, only a few men visible and they looking ready to exit to spend some time on the town. Desmond went straight to his rooms, pulled out his largest map of Britain and spread it over the table.

One way or another, he was going to get Eleanor.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Eleanor watched until the door slammed shut behind Desmond, then ducked as her father uncocked the pistol and swung it towards her. It struck her on the cheek, knocking her against the bannister. Dazed, she scrabbled with her hands to pull herself up, only to see blood dripping onto the stairs. A maid rushed up to her as her father watched.

He said only, "Get to your room and stay there until the wedding with Lord Montmarcy. I am done with the women of my household." With that, he stalked off to his room.

The maid helped Eleanor to her feet and walked with her to her room. Abby came in and immediately ran for a basin of cool water and some rags. The cut revealed itself to be small, but ready to bleed. Luckily it had not dripped onto her dress save a small spot which Appy quickly blotted and rinsed clean.

When the other maid had gone, Eleanor gripped Abby's hand and said, "Do you still want to help me?"

Abby shook her head up and down, saying, "What can I do?"

Eleanor told her.

That night, Abby came in to help Eleanor undress for bed. However, she found Eleanor with a bag bulging to its handles. She quickly helped Abby get out of her maid's clothes and into one of Eleanor's nightdresses. Then, Abby climbed into the bed.

"Oh, miss. Do you think it will work?"

"It will buy me time, which is all I can expect. If they think I have simply slept in, they won't raise the alarm. Now remember, they will let you go for this. Take this," she pressed some coins into Abby's hand, "and take a cab to Little Point. Lady Maberly will keep you until I can return for you."

Abby nodded, eyes wide and fluffed her fringe out to look more like Eleanor's hair.

Eleanor opened the window, pausing after it groaned to see if anyone had responded. When nothing happened, she leaned out and dropped her bag onto the ground by the base of the tree. Again, she waited for interminable minutes to make sure no one had heard before climbing out into the branches, carefully lifting her dress up and tucking it under her waist.

"Oh, miss! Be careful!"

Eleanor was too focused on edging farther down the branch to the main trunk. Her foot slipped once and she came down hard on the wood, but righted herself and continued on. After several tense minutes, she slipped to the ground and loosed her dress back over her legs. Picking up her bag, she waved to Abby and headed off.

It was cold, though she wore her dark blue pelisse from mourning. She remembered the way to the docks, and slipped quickly along the streets for nearly two hours until she came to the dock. Once again, masts rose overhead, piercing the gloom and some lit by lanterns from below. She walked along until she found the *Tempest*, and marched up the gangplank.

A sailor caught sight of her and stopped in his tracks, mouth agape, but she simply passed him and went to the captain's quarters where she knocked on the door.

"Come," came the brusque reply, and she entered, then set down her bag. He stood in only his breeches and shirt. It took him a minute to sense something different, but then he spun about and after seeing her, caught her to him.

They held one another tightly for some moments, then pulled back to look into each other' eyes. With a groan Desmond lowered his head to kiss her, claiming her mouth soundly. His cheek brushed against her cut, and she cried out causing him to look more closely. When he saw the spreading bruise and the congealed blood his expression darkened, and his thumb traced it gently.

"I'll kill him."

"Shh. It is nothing—I am here."

His eyes flew wide. "Yes, and it is only a matter of time before they find you. We must run." He made to leave, then stopped. He turned and knelt before her saying, "Will you marry me, Eleanor Warburton."

"Oh, yes!"

He grinned and rose to catch her against him once more. "Then we are going to Gretna Green. Tonight."

Surprise lit up her face, but she smiled and nodded. He kissed her again saying, "Wait here, I'll be back. She simply laid a hand against her beating heart, suddenly afraid of what would happen if she were caught.

Desmond returned with his first mate, Blake, and said to him. "They'll expect us to be on the ship. We are going by land to Gretna Green. You take the ship and the crew to Whitehaven—we will meet you there."

Blake nodded, smiling at Eleanor who nodded shyly. Quickly, Desmond grabbed a bag and stuffed it full of clothing, adding her ring to the top of it. Once done, the two of them left the *Tempest*, holding hands and rushing toward the street to claim a cab.

They found one quickly, and piled into it with a curt order to take them to a place where they could rent an equipage of their own. It took nearly an

hour along the streets of London to get there. The cab paused and they got out, Desmond quickly seizing upon the ostler and saying, "We need a small carriage or something to take us to Scotland."

The ostler's eyes widened and he said, "That will cost ye…" He named an amount that made Eleanor blanch, but Desmond shook on it, and they were shown to a place under an eave to await their rented coach.

It came around the corner after nearly an hour—an older, very compact carriage with two horses and a postillion to guide it. Desmond helped Eleanor into its rather cramped confines and made sure their bags were loaded as well. He spoke with the post boy for a moment before climbing in beside Eleanor. He sat beside her and cocked his head. He traced the shadow under her eye with one thumb and said, "Are you tired?"

She nodded and leaned her head down against his shoulder and felt him move to place his arm about her. The carriage moved along at a fair pace, and they bounced and jostled as the wheels went over the uneven road. Desmond held her tightly, nuzzling the top of her head. Now and then he tilted her face to his and his mouth would plunder hers.

The night sped by, and she woke to find him gone. Sitting straight up, she looked around and stepped outside the carriage which was parked on the side of the road. The post boy came out of the bushes and Desmond turned from his perusal of the road to catch sight of her.

"I've arranged for us to go to the next town, High Wycombe. We'll overnight there and leave tomorrow. Postillion's tired."

She nodded, a little nervous. He seemed to read her thoughts for he added, "I'll make sure we get two rooms…"

She blushed and looked away, but caught him smiling at her and could not help but smile back. "How long will it take us to get to Scotland?"

"A week, week and a half."

"What if he finds us?" She shuddered then at the thought that her father might be coming for her. He put his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "None of that. We're safe enough."

She could only nod.

By the time they reached High Wycombe and the inn, Eleanor could tell that Desmond was tired. They ate a late luncheon and then retired to their rooms where she found herself wide awake for some reason. To pass the time, she sat at the window and watched people come and go in the courses of their lives, wondering who they were and what they were up to. Finally, she yawned and retired to her bed.

It was yet dark when the landlady knocked on the door to call her. She dressed quickly, trying not to disturb the other traveller who had come in late the night before. Finally, she grabbed up her bag and her bonnet and shut the door quietly behind her.

Desmond stood at the bar, eating some bread and cheese. She took a few bites and washed it down with tepid tea before heading for the carriage. The

post boy, who was actually an elderly gentleman, was already astride one of the horses and she and Desmond climbed inside.

Within an hour the sun poked through the trees and Eleanor turned to Desmond, "Where will we live?"

He took a deep breath. "Well, I have a cottage in Lyme, or there's the *Tempest*. I don't know which you would prefer."

"*Tempest*…at least for a time." She thought quickly of children and butterflies swarmed her stomach.

"There's nothing to say I won't pay Blake to captain and live the life of a private gentleman."

She looked askance at him. "I can't see you away from the sea, somehow."

"I can't see me away from you."

They stared deep into one another's eyes, and Eleanor felt the stirrings of a deep longing. Her body came alive in ways she had rarely experienced. Her mouth parted, and he quickly bent to kiss her. The carriage hit a rut and jolted them apart, leaving them breathless and laughing.

The day passed quickly, Eleanor peering out the window from time to time as though afraid to see someone in pursuit of them. But as Desmond said, "If they are anywhere, it is on ship following the *Tempest*. They would never think to look for us on land."

It was late when they pulled up to the inn at Banbury. Once again Eleanor found herself in a room with a stranger who took much of the space of the bed. Squeezed to one side, she thought for certain she would never sleep, but her eyes closed, and she fell into disturbed dreams of being pursued along dark streets…

She woke with a start to find light beginning to peek through the curtains at the window. She rose and dressed quietly, then picked up her bag and left the room to step softly down the stairs which squeaked and groaned with every other step.

She found Desmond sitting in the main room by the fire. He looked up at her and tried to smile, though it did not reach his eyes. Alerted, suddenly, she went to him and said, "What is it?"

He indicated the newspaper which an express had brought from London. On the page where it was opened was a small advertisement:

Seeking young girl, Eleanor Warburton, age nineteen with dark red hair and green eyes, in the company of Desmond Coulter, sea captain, tall with black hair and blue eyes. May be headed toward Scotland by sea. Reward for information as to her whereabouts. There followed further description and the address to which to send the information to.

Eleanor lifted her eyes to Desmond's and paled. "What if someone sees us?"

"They would first have to see this. But, I think perhaps you should adjust your bonnet so your hair does not show and we tell no one our names or my

profession."

Her heart pounded in her chest, and she was aware of the smallest sound despite the blood whooshing through her ears. Gently he rose and lifted her after him, "Come, old Jerrie should be ready for us."

"What if he turns us in?"

"I doubt he even reads, Eleanor. Please, do not distress yourself. No one can actually stop us…"

"What if my father engages some navy men to come after us?"

"They would need the blessing of their captain, and I think the war with France takes precedence. Truly, it will be well."

They sat in the carriage nibbling the breakfast packed by the innkeeper's wife. Jerrie seemed to have food stores of his own under the box seat of the carriage. He rarely spoke unless in answer to a question, and then with the shortest possible answer.

Eleanor recognized the countryside as they entered Coventry and found quiet-looking inn on the outskirts. Desmond arranged their rooms, while Eleanor did her best to hide her eyes from onlookers' gazes. They ate a late supper and then retired after a single kiss.

Once more, Eleanor found herself sharing the room, this time with a wide-awake spinster who was seated by the fire, knitting.

"Oh, well, looks like I shall have company tonight. What's your name, miss?"

"El…izabeth. Wadham."

"And I am Agnes. Agnes Luden. Well, Lizzie, fancy that. My very best friend is named Elizabeth. She is in Bath just now, taking the waters for her lumbago, though I don't know that it will help. Still, she would try. Her mother is with her and such a trial that is, I am certain. Old Mrs. Beacham is deaf as a post and can't walk without help herself. I told her to stay home, but old Mrs. B would go. There, I've dropped a stitch…let me catch this."

Eleanor reluctantly took off her bonnet and her dress, stripping down to her chemise and climbing into bed. Agnes took one look at her and remarked, "What lovely hair—not carroty at all but just a deep, dark auburn, though there isn't much of it…what happened? Was it a fever? My sister lost all her hair once due to a fever. Took ever so long to grow back in."

"No, no fever."

"Red hair…red hair…seems to me I read something in the newspaper about red hair."

"Well, if you will excuse me, I have an early start." Eleanor laid down and adjusted the pillow while Agnes continued to prattle on.

"Oh, don't mind me. I'll just sit here quietly and knit. Such a night owl I am and always have been. I remember my mother pleading with me to go to sleep, so worn out was she. But there was nothing for it, I was just never sleepy until very late. Of course, don't call me early because I simply won't come. I like my lie-in of a morning…"

Eleanor listened to the monotonous tone as it meandered across the many byways of Agnes's mind. Sometime in the night, she fell asleep to dream of bathing in Bath and running from a woman who looked much like Agnes.

Morning came, Eleanor's eyes opened to silence in the room, and she crept from the bed and dressed as silently as she could before edging out of the room and navigating the crooked stairs to the main room below.

She was alone, and felt a moment of panic at not seeing Desmond. The stairs creaked and she spun to see him step onto the floor and smile gently at her. Relief must have shown in her face for he frowned a little and asked, "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "I just panicked a little when I didn't see you."

He pulled her into his arms and held her tight for a moment. "I will always come for you, never fear."

She nestled her head against his shoulder and nodded. Once more they started on their way with a packet of cold meat pies supplied by the innkeeper's daughter and a can of water.

For nearly a week longer they made their way across the countryside, finally ending in Carlisle, only a few miles from Gretna Green. Eleanor, road-weary, stepped down from the carriage and looked up into Desmond's eyes. He smiled, then bent to kiss her, waking her from her malaise and stirring her core to life.

"This is our last night apart." He whispered against her ear.

"Tomorrow can't come soon enough," she said, stars reflecting down into her eyes.

Reluctantly they broke apart and after a long gaze, headed to their respective rooms. Eleanor found herself alone in the room and breathed a sigh of relief that no Agnes was there. She set her bonnet on a low dresser and undressed slowly. The chill in the air warred with the flames of the small fire and she jumped quickly beneath the covers to shiver until they warmed.

Despite her fatigue, she could not sleep, and tossed for some minutes trying to get comfortable. Finally, she lay on her side, staring into the fire and thinking. Her mind filled with questions, and sought out answers in forgotten corners of her memories. Sometime late in the night, sleep claimed her.

Chapter Thirty

Morning arrived on the heels of a hard frost. The ground glittered and chimneys smoked in an attempt to warm the homes from the harsh chill. Desmond woke and sat up in bed, disturbing the gentleman asleep beside him who rolled over and grunted. He was anxious to have a bed to himself, and realized his bed on the *Tempest* would need to be modified to hold he and Eleanor. A slow smile spread across his face at the thought.

He dressed quickly, shuddering at the icy touch of his stiff clothing. Once he affixed his coat's buttons, he stepped free of the room and went as quietly as possible down the stairs. Waiting at a table near the bar, sat Eleanor.

She wore her dark blue pelisse and plain straw bonnet. Her gaze found him, and she smiled at him, lighting him up with warmth from deep inside. He made his way to her and said, "Are you ready?"

"Oh yes!"

"Then let's go!" He pulled her after him and she giggled as they went through the door outside to wait for Jimmie to bring the carriage around. But, instead of the usual carriage, they saw only Jimmie walking around from the stables.

Desmond frowned and took a step toward him, "What is it?"

"Horse 's lame."

Eleanor looked up at him. "We can surely rent another, can't we?"

Nodding, Desmond kissed her lightly and stepped off down the main road in search of a carriage to rent. He passed a couple of them in the street, but they were hurrying past. Then he came upon a pub with a single carriage waiting outside. He stepped inside and looked around. There, sitting by himself, a haphazardly dressed older man lifted a glass of ale to his lips, despite the early hour.

Desmond approached and sat in the seat next to him. "Sir, is that your fine carriage outside?"

Rheumy eyes focused blearily upon him and the man said, "Aye."

"I am Desmond Coulter, and I am here with my fiancée on our way to Gretna Green, only our horse is lame. We need to rent a carriage or a horse—just for half a day."

The man turned his face to Desmond—large nose and lower lip that both

seemed to sag downwards. He squinted his eyes at him and said,

"Ambrose McHale. Lovers, eh?"

Desmond nodded. "Can you help us?"

"Damned lovers always traipsing through my town. What the hell you wanna marry for?"

"I love her, and she loves me. I plan to take her away on my ship…"

"Ship? Ship, you say…where is this ship?"

"Whitehaven, I hope, if nothing has stopped my first mate from bringing her there."

"Why aren't you on your ship, then?"

"We tried to evade her father—the admiral."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute…you're tall wi' black hair and blue eyes. I'll bet she has red hair and green eyes. It's you the paper was on about."

Panic-struck, Desmond straightened and said, "Well, sir, I won't waste any more of your time."

"Naw, naw, naw, don' go. I'll help ye. Got no love of the navy and their interfering ways." He got down from the stool and walked with a rolling limp toward the door. Desmond followed, unsure of where they were going. Ambrose walked up to the carriage. Up close, Desmond could see the worn lacquer and rusted springs. The step had come loose on one side and hung askew, while one of the windows was laced with a series of fine cracks and missing a chunk from the corner.

"Walter! Hey, Walter!"

The door to the carriage opened and an old man emerged rubbing his eyes. "Eh?"

"What are ye doin' in the carriage?"

"Waitin' on you."

"Well I need you to take this gen'leman an' his girl to Gretna Green. The blacksmith just over the bridge."

"Righto." Walter climbed onto the driver's box and waited for Desmond to climb in. The door didn't want to stay shut after McHale slammed it, and he said,

"Ye'll just have to hold the handle from the inside if it won't close". Desmond reached over and grasped it, holding on as Walter chirruped to the horses. He looked back through the window and watched as McHale waved to him before going back into the pub.

When they arrived back at the inn, he stepped out and collected Eleanor, brought her out to the ramshackle carriage and grinned engagingly at her. Her eyebrows shot up, but she climbed in carefully and sat on the worn seat opposite Desmond who once again held the handle to the door shut.

They started off with a jolt and Eleanor suddenly started to giggle. Desmond looked at her in surprise, then joined her. She caught her breath and said, "Oh! This is perfect!"

He laughed, though a sudden bump sent him flying and he let go of the

handle. The door flapped open, and he stood up to reach out and pull it to.

"Careful, Desmond!" Eleanor cried and he sat down with a triumphant look on his face, though his arm was twisted holding the door closed. He paused and smiled saying,

"Say that again…"

"Say what?"

"My name."

She smiled shyly, then said, "Desmond."

He grinned slowly. "I like the sound of that."

She laughed softly, cocked her head and said, "Well, say mine!"

"Eleanor…"

She closed her eyes and sighed. "Oh my, I have waited for that!"

"And here we are eloping in a broken-down carriage!"

She laughed again, this time joyfully, and reached across and pulled her to him…an awkward action considering he still had to keep hold of the door handle. When she was securely across his lap, he kissed her soundly even as the carriage came to a stop.

They broke apart, and Desmond frowned. "I don't think we can be there already…" He set her back on the opposite seat and moved to open the door.

It was pulled open jerking Desmond who fell out onto the ground. Eleanor cried out and jumped to help him. Desmond had already lurched to his feet and held his arms out to shield her from the men surrounding them. From their white breeches and blue coats, he deduced they were navy men. He caught sight of a face he recognized—James Hannigan!

"What do you want with us?" Desmond's voice sounded.

"Are you Eleanor Warburton?" the lead man asked to Eleanor.

Desmond hushed her with a movement of his hand. "Don't answer until we know why we are being stopped in this manner."

The lead man, a captain by the look of him, said, "We are here under orders from Admiral Warburton to retrieve his daughter from her kidnapper."

"He is no kidnapper!" Eleanor burst out, then went still as their eyes went to her.

The lead man snapped, "Hannigan! You're here so you can recognize Coulter. Is this him?"

Lt. Hannigan came forward a little and looked hard at Desmond and Eleanor. His face looked haggard, and Desmond could only guess how hard they had been going in order to find him. He stared at Lt. Hannigan, knowing he recognized him easily. His mind raced as he tried to plan how they would escape the naval men. The lieutenant looked into his eyes, then shook his head. After a moment, he said, "This isn't him."

One of the men groaned. "You sure? We traced his ship to Whitehaven. We're on the doorstep to Gretna Green and they match the description."

"Yes, I know, but this isn't him."

The captain's voice exploded from him. "Damn and blast! I am tired of

this charade. Come along, men."

Desmond watched them go, and met the look that Hannigan cast back at him with a slight nod. Eleanor looked him over and said, "Are you injured?"

He shook his head. "No, just ruined the knee of my pants. Not much of a bridegroom my dear."

She smiled, tweaking a lock of his hair into place. "Well, I am most satisfied. Come along, let's go before we are stopped by anyone else."

Soon they came to the little river Sark and passed over the bridge leading to the town itself. Just as they had read, there stood a blacksmith's shop, and they went in to find the blacksmith there.

He was short and wizened, and did not smile. Simply glanced over at them and said, "Where ye from?" Eleanor glanced at Desmond and they both answered. The blacksmith then looked up and asked, "Are ye both willing to receive each other for better or worse, rich or poor, long as ye both may live?"

"Yes!"

"Oh, yes!"

"Got a ring?" he asked.

Desmond fumbled with the little wooden box. He pulled the ring free and slipped it onto her finger, though she had to work it over the knuckle. She stared at it for a long moment and smiled up at him.

The blacksmith slammed his hammer down on the anvil and said, "Yer married. Write yer names i' t' book." They quickly signed their names and looked at one another.

"Married!" said Desmond.

"Yes!"

"Come, Mrs. Coulter, we need to get McHale's carriage back to him." Desmond held his arm out to her and led her from the blacksmith's shop. The ride back to the pub was uneventful, and Desmond helped her down from the carriage, bypassing the broken step. He went into the pub to find old McHale who had fallen asleep in a corner. He wrote a short note on a scrap of paper and left it in the man's breast pocket before returning to his wife.

She gripped his arm as they walked back to the inn. "How will we get to Whitehaven?"

He shrugged. "I guess we will have to see if we can catch a mail coach or rent another."

Once at the inn, they conferred with Jimmie who said the horse was much improved and that they would be able to leave in the morning. Desmond looked down at her and smiled, "I guess I shall have to book us a room for the night." He returned after a few moments, to say, "All set. What shall we do with our day?"

Eleanor simply smiled. He smiled slowly back at her before bending to kiss her. The world around them faded into the background as their lips met long and lingeringly. Leaning back, she sighed and gave a little tug to his hand. One side of his mouth crooked up, and he followed her up the stairs.

Epilogue

It took nearly three days to reach Whitehaven. There, moored in the icy mist, sat *Tempest*, her sails tied down and looking spare as a result. Desmond paid Jerrie and sent him off while he carried their bags up the gangplank to the deck. Willie Blake met them, with the rest of the crew ringed about. A cheer went up suddenly, and Blake clapped Desmond on the shoulder in congratulations. When the cheers had died down, Desmond led Eleanor to their quarters.

He started in surprise to see a new, larger bed where his old bed had been. He turned to Blake who grinned and said, "A wedding present from the crew."

Eleanor blushed, but smiled up at Desmond. He waved his thanks before he closed the door on the crew and cast his eyes around the room. "It isn't much, my dear, but all I have is yours."

She spun to him and pulled his head down to hers, kissing him long and hard. She did not stop until she had wrung a deep groan from him. He raised his head only to look over her face and say.

"You're here…forever by my side."

"Yes."

"I think I need to get this ship under sail."

"I need to unpack my pitifully sparse wardrobe."

"We shall sail to Ireland and order some dresses for you, then pick them up on the return voyage."

She nodded. "I've never been to Ireland—I look forward to that."

He kissed her and broke away. "Then I'd better get *Tempest* going." She raced after him as he pushed out onto the deck and shouted orders for setting sails and casting off. Her heart lifted like the gulls overhead and she climbed the fo'c'sle and leaned out over the bow as the sails came loose and began to fill with the wind. Slowly, they edged away from the dock and headed out to sea. As she looked up, Desmond came up beside her and penned her against the rail with his arm. She gazed up at him and smiled, then looked out over the horizon as he pulled her close and stood with her as the *Tempest* sailed onward.

The End

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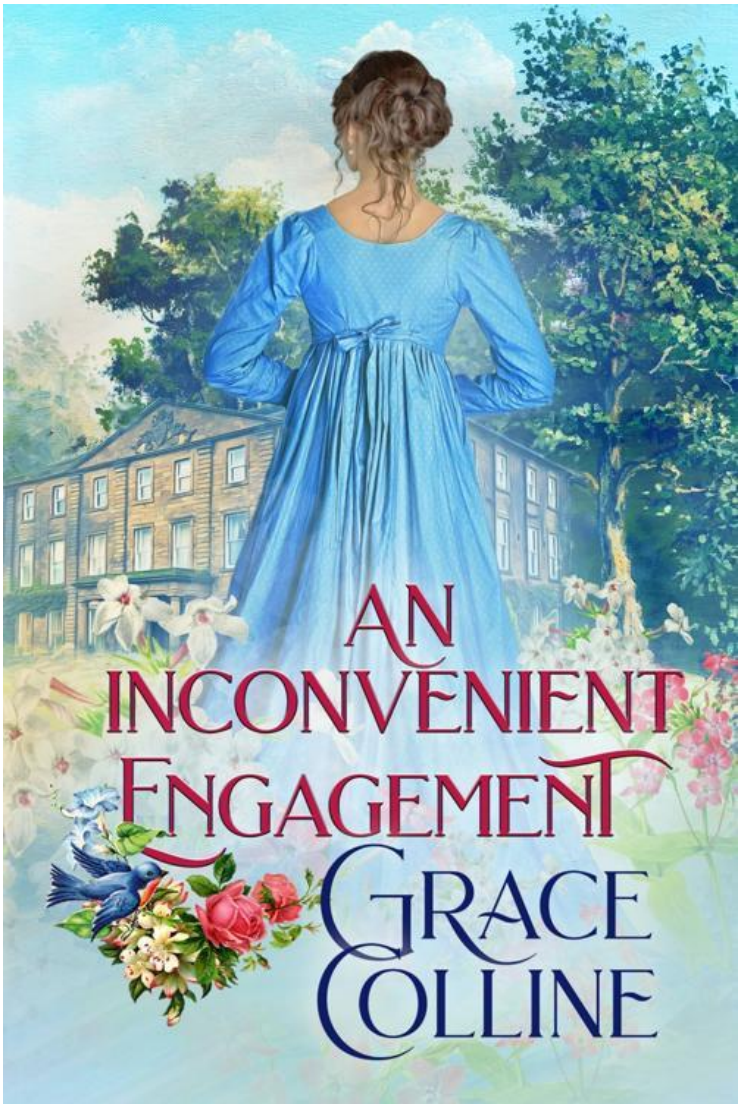
About the Author



Grace Colline lives in Stockbridge, Georgia with two of her five children and way too many dogs. When she is not grading papers for her online Biology classes or cooking, she is dreaming of worlds very different to our own. For inspiration, she sits at her spinning wheel turning fiber into yarn until the story is ready to be told.

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Prologue

Sir William Strathom was surprisingly calm. Surely, he thought, a man should be a mass of nerves when contemplating an engagement. He waited in the parlor, as he had on several occasions. Miss Maria Lockley, of the Shropshire Lockleys, would soon join him. Well, not soon if his limited experience with her predicted. Certainly, he would have ample time to drum up a palpitation or two.

At 28, he had succeeded his father to the newly granted barontecy and stepped into his shoes at a recently purchased estate. The grandeur of this house, however, was enough to strike awe into the heart of any suitor. Every inch of the parlor bespoke history and status, from the generations of portraits gazing placidly down to the ornate cornices, painted ceiling, and elegant furniture that was so uncomfortable to sit and wait upon. He stood, to spare himself and to be ready.

"Miss Maria Lockley." The butler announced and stood aside. The lady herself entered, floated more like, in white gauze muslin with tiny rosebuds embroidered about the bodice and hem. She wore a small garnet cross on a plain chain about her pale, perfect neck. The slippers he caught brief sight of as he knelt were adorned with silk roses as well.

She curtseyed, "Sir William."

He glanced up at the harsh sound of her voice. Telltale redness about her eyes and a hoarseness to her voice that belied recent strong emotion, or perhaps it was merely ague. Whatever it was, he could not allow it to sway him from his purpose. He reached for her hand which was already waiting, "Miss Lockley," he said. "I am hoping to persuade you to honor me by becoming my wife…"

"I accept, Sir William."

He blinked. In none of the scenarios he had rehearsed in his head had he thought it would be so easy. He had been encouraged, but so had other young men – one in particular he thought. Still taken aback, he stood. "Well, that is excellent. Perhaps you will excuse me while I go to speak with your father."

He paused a moment in case she was suddenly overcome with emotion. She was not, but she did ring the bell to call a servant for him.

He was led by a servant to the study of the Twelfth Earl of Lockley, a

matter that took several minutes in the large manor house. The Earl stood with his back to the room, staring out a window onto Grosvenor Street and appeared to be waiting. Again, the discussion he had dreaded seemed but a matter of course. The business was soon done, confirmation of her dowry achieved and permission to set a date obtained. It was almost as though the Lockleys had solicited Sir William for Maria's hand rather than the other way 'round.

Within half an hour, William sat in his carriage contemplating his achievement. "Father, I have done it. As you asked. I have won the hand of a girl of unimpeachable character and long family line." He paused, a sudden notion occurring to him. "I had expected to feel something of a more elated nature upon attaining this goal." Surely, he thought, a man would be happy to have won the girl of his dreams?

Chapter One

Warm days gave way to cooler nights in the Yorkshire countryside. Hidden among the drystone-walled fields and woods was a cottage on the outskirts of a village. The door opened, and Eliza tied her brown bonnet on before drawing her shawl around her shoulders. Stepping out into the cool breeze she took a deep breath and savored the earthy smells of soil, decaying leaves, and the last flowers of summer. The sky was becoming overcast, making all the greens stand out vividly against the growing browns of coming fall.

She looked to the right along the road toward the town of Lytchley - a moderately sized village with a general store, post office, haberdashers (Dimmits), two pubs, the apothecary, and the usual bakers and butchers. Same darling village, same comfortable life, same predictable future. She sighed.

Turning away, she followed the old Bank Road off away from town until it turned into little more than a dirty lane shaded on one side by trees. There was a ditch and then fields to her left, trees and the occasional house or cottage to her right. She quickened her pace past the abandoned cottage said to be haunted, then broke into a full run. She spread her arms wide and let her shawl flap behind her in the wind. For a moment, she felt like a bird about to take flight. Then, a sharp gust snatched it free and flung it along the lane until it snagged on a lower limb of an old elm tree.

"Oh, la!" She turned to walk back, only to discover that she was being watched.

A man on a horse sat there, watching her.

Eliza watched his large horse pull up nearby. He appeared taller than perhaps he was astride his horse. He wore a top hat and a superbly cut mossy green coat that set off his deep hazel eyes. Rather heavy brows made him look moody, but he was good-looking without being prettily handsome. She thought he was smiling, although it was difficult to see through eyes stung by the wind.

Without a word he reached up and freed the shawl with a gentle tug. She stretched out her hand to take it from him, but instead he dismounted and held it out to her. She neared him, but instead of giving it to her, he wrapped it securely around her shoulders himself. "There, the little bird has its wings."

She blushed at that – so he had seen! She shuffled her heavy, scuffed boots so that they were hidden behind the hem of her dress. “Thank you, sir.” She smiled and gratefully gripped it securely about her bare arms. Their eyes met – dark brown and deep hazel. She felt her pulse quicken, as though something dormant had come alive within.

“I am at a disadvantage,” he said. “There is no one here to introduce us.”

“Well, I am Eliza Denham.” She curtseyed.

“William Stratham, at your service.” He bowed.

Her face drained of color. “*Sir* William. Oh, my Lord, I am sorry.”

His head cocked to one side. “For what?”

“I…I don’t actually know!” She laughed then, and his smile deepened. “I guess for everything…and nothing.”

Oh *very* good, she berated herself silently. Her hands smoothed her apron and then strayed to her bonnet ribbons. “I live just down this lane,” she said as she backed away slightly and began to walk in the direction of home. Sir William held his horse’s reins and fell in to walk sedately beside her.

“Do you often walk about the countryside alone?” he asked.

“I often walk, and alone if I can possibly help it. It soothes my soul.”

“And I have intruded. I apologize.”

“Nonsense! I don’t often get escorted by baronets on horseback.” She smiled up at him.

“I have not seen you around town before,” he said.

“No, I believe you came here while I was away at school.”

“Yes. Father bought the estate two or three years ago. He died last year.”

“I heard. I am so sorry.”

“As am I. He left a difficult void to fill.”

They walked in comfortable silence for a moment or two and then Eliza asked, “I understand you have a brother.”

“Yes. George. He is several years younger.”

“I would have liked to have a brother or sister.”

“You are alone?” He cocked his head to one side as he looked down at her.

“I have Uncle, but yes, alone.”

“Your parents?”

“Father died when I was very young, and mother passed some years ago. Aunt and Uncle Enger came to care for me here in Little Cottage, but my aunt passed shortly after. So now it is just me and Uncle.”

They were passing the abandoned cottage, and he glanced up at the overgrown walls. “It seems strange to see an empty home so close to the village.”

“There is a sad story associated with it.”

“Can you tell me?” He asked quickly, as though eager to keep her talking.

“I believe it belonged to an older family – the Havertons, who all died

and left the small estate to a young man – I forget his name. He loved a girl and married her. But he went away on some business and, while he was gone, she died."

"So, he abandoned it?"

"Yes. The day of the funeral he sent the servants off, locked the door and never returned. You can imagine how the boys hereabouts have vandalized it."

"When did all this happen?" They had stopped in front of the cottage and were both looking up at its staring windows.

"Oh, these fifty years at least," she said.

He looked down at her, tilting his head to see past her bonnet. She was looking up at the cottage but caught his eye. "What are you thinking?" he asked.

She blinked and half-smiled at him. "Just that it is a sad monument to love. I cannot think that his wife's memory is at all honored by this cottage wasting away in dereliction and decay. I wonder who, or what, he was punishing."

"Perhaps he just acted out of pain. People do…"

"Yes. But after all this time, surely he could let it go to someone who might love it and restore it to some measure of glory."

"So, there is still some part of the story left untold."

"Yes! And must remain so, I fear." She glanced up at him.

He was gazing so intently at her that she wondered if he was still thinking about the cottage. A whole minute passed before she realized they had stopped walking and were simply staring at each other.

She opened her mouth to speak, but a sharp yelping rose into an agonized cry from the wild fields around the empty cottage. His horse shied slightly as the sound shot through them. The howling rose wildly and without thinking, she raced off in the direction, Sir William trotting carefully beside her. She skirted the side of the cottage and followed an old garden path into the field far behind it. The sound escalated and was accompanied by thrashing as she drew near. She had to search through the bracken and undergrowth, but finally found the source of the agonized cries.

There, writhing on the ground, foot caught in the rusted teeth of an ancient trap was Ol' Gower's dog Ben. Eliza knelt carefully beside the dog which was snarling in pain and terror. William was instantly beside her, his horse standing alertly nearby. He cast around for a stick, and gently maneuvered it to press the pan and release the teeth. Eliza tore a strip from her apron and tied it securely around the leg as it was released, holding the broken bones still as William held the dog still in a steely grip.

He then lifted the dog which struggled less but continued to whine. She wrapped the leg securely as he held the dog firmly. The skin had been broken and was bleeding freely. The bones held together, though the leg was bent from the trap's teeth. It straightened as she held it, and the dog yelped again. It

took her several minutes to finish stabilizing the leg. She then wrapped another bandage more lightly around it to capture the blood seeping through.

"Which way to his owner's home?"

She had to think…just over that hill behind the cottage? "This way, I think."

"I will carry him, if you will lead my horse."

She hesitated but picked up the dropped reins and led the way over the hill. The dog had stopped his screaming, but his whines would escalate at times. The ground was uneven, broken and difficult to traverse. The wind kept snatching at her shawl, and to keep it from flying in the horse's eyes she had rolled it underneath her free arm.

They crested the low hill, and she cast about for a moment, then motioned off to the right. They plunged down the hill into the shallow hollow, and after a couple of false turns they stood in the yard of the shepherd's little home. "Gower!" Eliza called. "Gower?"

A wiry, bent figure started then stood in the field beyond. His grizzled form paused for a moment, as though trying to make sense of the odd tableau of the young lord holding the dog, the large black horse, and Eliza with her bloodied and torn clothing. He broke into a stunted run and arrived, panting.

"Wha' 'appened?"

Eliza's hand was on the dog to help calm him. "It's Ben. He was in a trap – I've set the bone as best I can and secured it."

Gower stopped in the process of taking his dog gently into his own arms. Ben licked at the old man's hands even as he whined in pain and greeting. "'Ow did this 'appen?"

"The old cottage – there must have been a poacher's trap left. It looked quite old," Eliza said.

The old man's voice was suspiciously rough as he cradled his dog to him. "Thank 'ee, Lass. Sir. Thank 'ee." He adjusted his grip on the dog and turned to carry him ever so gently toward his home.

Eliza watched him disappear into the little house and turned to walk up the path toward town. William followed beside her, leading his horse. She removed what was left of her apron and rolled it up. Her dress had a couple tears and a smear or two of blood and she quickly draped her shawl around her to cover some of the mess. She looked up at Sir William. "Thank you for your help with Ben," she said. "He is 'Ol Gower's world."

"I can see that." He appeared deeply touched by the old man's obvious attachment to the dog.

"Truthfully, Gower relies completely on Ben with the sheep. I don't know what he will do until Ben is recovered. I suppose Jamie's dogs will have to do it all…" She bit her lip as she thought about her cousin.

She shivered slightly in the breeze and he burst out. "Why do women wear such flimsy clothes!"

"I think it is only the shock, Sir. Besides, these skirts and sleeves are the

fashion, and we are somewhat constrained by it. You can thank Empress Josephine!" She did not want to add that she had only one pelisse, and it was far too nice for such walks. *Thank goodness*, she thought, *or it would have been ruined today*.

"Odd that we bow to the fashion whims of a country we are at war with," he said, breaking into her thoughts.

"Indeed. Society is quite a complicated business." She absently pushed at the muddied blood on her dress, and the movement seemed to catch his eye. He paused, inscrutable, the lightness gone in an instant.

She could almost read his thoughts—Society….and he had been walking with an unaccompanied girl along an abandoned country lane. A girl now covered in torn and bloody clothing.

After a moment, he broke the silence, "Well, I will leave you now. Good day." He mounted in one fluid motion and reined his horse off and spurred her over the fields leaving Eliza suddenly quite alone.

"Well. Good day then." She watched until he was gone from view, then looked ruefully down. Her afternoon dress was torn and smeared with blood. There was dirt covering the hem of her dress, and scuffed boots showing from underneath the hem. "I don't suppose I would want to be seen with me, either."

It took much less time to walk home. She had no sooner crossed the threshold when Bessie accosted her. Large and square and motherly, the sole servant to their household was fiercely protective. "Miss Eliza whatever happened? Is that blood—are you injured?" The noise attracted the attention of her Uncle, who added his own concerns. Quickly, she explained then excused herself to change.

When she was done, she inspected the damage to her dress. The apron would be relegated to the rags, but the dress could be salvaged with some clever needlework. She sighed, and for not the first time wondered what it was like to be a real lady like Henrietta Darrow with trunks and wardrobes overflowing with dresses and no need to hide numerous repairs in the hopes of salvaging a day dress for a little while longer.

But then, she thought as she looked out the window, straining to catch a glimpse of Tredwell Abbey hidden by Lytchley and the fields and moors between. Henrietta would never have been free to go walking about the country, and just happen to meet a handsome, warm-hearted baronet on his beautiful steed. She smiled.

Perhaps, she thought, she had the better end of that particular stick.

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